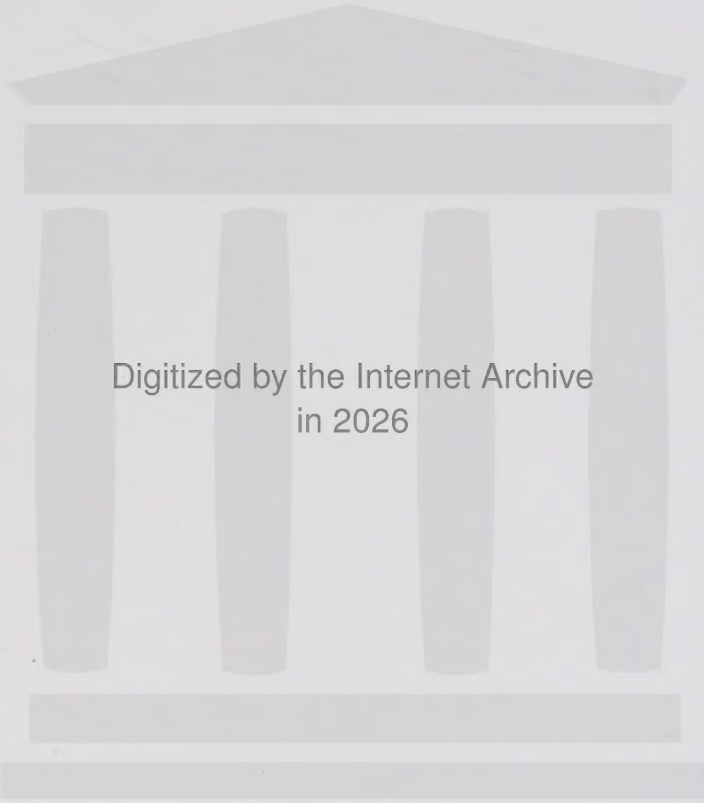


American Drug Addict

a memoir



Brett Douglas



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And finally, Bill W, Dr. Bob, and the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous without which I would have never found recovery.

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a memoir

The story you are about to read is true. None of the events have been fabricated. If you happen to be one of the people mentioned in this book and have a problem with what I've written, do not contact me and complain. Write your own damn book.

Condemnation

by
Depeche Mode

Condemnation
Tried
Here on the stand
With a book in my hand
And truth on my side

Accusations
Lies
Hand me my sentence
I'll show no repentance
I'll suffer with pride

If for honesty
You want apologies
I don't sympathize
If for kindness
You substitute blindness,
Please open your eyes

Condemnation
Why
Because my duty
Was always to beauty
And that was my crime

Feel elation
High
To know I can trust this
Fix of injustice
Time after time

If you see purity as immaturity
Well, it's no surprise
If for kindness
You substitute blindness,
Please open your eyes

Brett Douglas

Sanity had returned. As I stirred from my slumber, I slowly scanned my surroundings. I was lying on a concrete bed located in the back of a cell. An impenetrable, metal door adorned one wall, the only means of leaving the room. It was locked from the outside. The cell was barren, except for a stainless-steel toilet and sink in the corner. The lack of windows made gauging time impossible.

I looked down at my body. It was covered with a thin, paper smock. My feet were bare. The temperature felt like a walk-in freezer, causing me to shiver and ball up in a fetal position. A wound on my neck throbbed, covered with what felt like tape. The cause of the injury was no mystery; I had cut my own throat.

I stretched my legs out on my cement bed. My mind was blank, a mental rest from the storm I had just emerged from. Lying on my back, I studied the concrete ceiling while waiting for a thought to move to the forefront of my mind. *What... the fuck... AM I DOING?* I remained motionless for some time, then turned my head toward the cinder block wall next to me. All places like this are constructed with these types of blocks and painted with a lifeless, sterile shade of white. I placed my hand on it. *I put this wall here.*

After fixating on my hand for a while, the next thought rushed forward. It was the most compelling one. *I need to write this down.*

By the way, my name is Brett. I'm a drug addict. That sounds bad, and ultimately, it is bad. If the very first time I used drugs my entire life

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disintegrated, all the people I loved disappeared, all my possessions were discarded, and I stared Death in the face, I would have nothing to write about. My drug use would have stopped there.

Although drug addiction is bad, drugs are great. I love getting high. Drugs are the only thing in life I *always* want. I can't even say that about sex. I've never laid my head on a pillow at night and thought, *Damn, I forgot to get high today*. I may have forgotten to pay a bill or show up for some important appointment. I have never forgotten to get high.

Drugs are my best friend. I can always count on them to make me feel better. Drugs cure what's ailing me and ease my discomfort and anxiety. I choose drugs over human companionship every time.

I love the process of acquiring drugs; the shady characters, the dangerous situations, the clandestine meetings in sleazy motel rooms, parking lots, or public bathrooms. I love the thrill of breaking the law and thumbing my nose at the police.

I love the process of doing drugs; the equipment which must be procured, the meticulous ritual of preparing them, the methodical steps taken to create the perfect buzz, and the search for a private but perilous location to do it.

I love the sneakiness required to pull off an awesome high without my exploits being discovered. I love fooling people, making them believe I'm something I'm not. The more audacious the deception; the more I get a thrill from it. I love the tension which comes from being intoxicated in situations which require sober thoughts and actions. I love toying with the risk of bringing

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the wrath of my loved ones down on me. I love having something that's mine, something I don't have to share, something about myself only I know. Drugs are like an illegal exotic pet; I must nurture it but, at the same time, keep it hidden.

Drugs are my only true motivation; they're my reward when life goes my way and my consolation prize when I experience failure. Drugs are the one thing I always look forward to when all other endeavors in life which once brought me joy align themselves in the mundane column.

Above all, I love the anticipation of getting high after an arbitrary period of abstinence, the race to the purchase location, the slowing of time, and the unrelenting knot in my stomach as I yearn for that first hit. Sometimes, this stress is better than the high itself.

Drug use is two-tiered. Tier one is the first time you do a drug; this time is always the best. Tier two is the rest of your life spent pursuing that first experience, hoping in vain you might relive that thrill again. If only some way existed to capture that feeling, to contain it in some manner, so you could savor it whenever the urge arose. But that's not possible; when excitement fades, all that's left is routine.

A sentiment I frequently hear is, "My worst day sober is better than my best day high." That statement, at least in my experience, is complete bullshit. Some of the most exciting, memorable, and socially fulfilling moments of my life occurred while I was high. Of course, now that I think about it, most of my life occurred while I was high. Although those grand sober moments are purer and have more meaning and depth, they pale in comparison to the intensity,

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exhilaration, and humorous insanity of those drug-riddled ones. So, as sad as it is to say, my best day high was better than my best day sober.

Of course, the opposite is true. To use a physics analogy, Newton's Third Law of Motion states, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." This law applies to drug use as well. Thus, my worst day high was definitely worse than my worst day sober. The intensity of a drug-induced low is an order of magnitude greater than any low which can be experienced while sober. If we rewrote Newton's Third Law to apply to this situation, it would read, "Every action produces a reaction that is opposite and exponentially more intense than the action which created it."

What makes a drug-induced low so terrible? If you don't know, you're lucky. The low points which normies experience (a normie is a non-addict) come in one of two varieties: physical or mental. A bad stomach virus is a physical low, while the death of a loved one is a mental low. But a drug-induced low includes both components. The physical part includes some or all the following: shakes, tremors, intense flu-like symptoms, extreme hot and cold flashes, body sweats more copious than a marathon jogger in August, twitching, debilitating fatigue, vomiting, and diarrhea. In other words, it's no trip to Disneyworld.

As hard as this may be to believe, the mental low which accompanies the physical one is sometimes worse. Only two thoughts run through a person's mind who is experiencing this affliction. The first thought is *What is the quickest and most painless way to kill myself?* This thought is usually, but not always,

blotted out by the second thought, which is *What is the quickest way to acquire more drugs?*

The lowest of the low moments is knowing where to get drugs but having no money to purchase them. This situation is hitting a low from a freefall. I call it “The Septic Tank Under Hell.” This desperation causes an addict to venture down the Dark Corridor, a place in everyone’s mind where sane people never go. The Dark Corridor houses those thoughts which are so insidious and actions which are so destructive, it’s only visited by those among us who are truly evil. The Dark Corridor is where morality and personal values are disregarded, the Dark Corridor of despicable behavior, the Dark Corridor of depravity.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

My father, Robert, bristled whenever I referred to myself as a drug addict. He has told me on several occasions, “Don’t call yourself that. It’s a defeatist attitude and will only drag you down.”

My father is wrong. I can’t think of a single instance where the truth would be detrimental to my life. Unless, of course, I’m confessing a heinous crime to the police. Let me rephrase that last statement; being completely honest *with myself* can never be detrimental to my life. But that level of honesty is impossible while I’m using drugs. The reason is simple; knowing and accepting an untenable fact about myself is difficult. Who wants to accept in the pit of

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their soul they're a douchebag? Who wants to stare at the fact that all the positive attributes they believe they possess don't exist? Who wants to admit they've been defeated by the oldest cliché in the book? In the 21st century, where cameras and mirrors are everywhere, I'm amazed at how difficult seeing myself really is.

I would imagine the source of Robert's disdain over me labeling myself a drug addict centers around the mental image which is produced by that phrase. So, let's perform....

A Simple Experiment

- 1) Clear your mind
- 2) Close your eyes
- 3) If you're listening to this book in audio format while driving, reopen your eyes
- 4) If 3) is applicable, center your car between the lines on the road
- 5) Think of the type of person the term "drug addict" creates

Now, let's make a quick comparison. Did the mental image produced in #5 have any of the following traits?

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- 1) A clean cut white guy with all his teeth intact.
- 2) A middle-class husband of 27 years with two well-balanced and intelligent children, three cats, one dog, and a house in the suburbs with an actual white picket fence.
- 3) An educated man with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science and a minor in Mathematics, and an additional BSBA in Accounting.
- 4) An intellect who owned a computer 10 years before the Internet was available, has read the works of Hawking, Penrose, Green, Kaku, Darwin, Einstein, Copernicus, and Newton, and is a Star Trek fanatic.
- 5) An accomplished businessman who has owned three businesses.

I imagine your mental image of a drug addict didn't include any of the preceding traits. If you haven't already guessed, the person described above is me.

The title of this memoir was derived from the Bret Easton Ellis book *American Psycho*, which is the story of a killer who doesn't fit the stereotypical image of a psychopath. The American version of anything usually doesn't fit the mold. While Mr. Ellis's book is a work of fiction, unfortunately, this story is true.

At this point, you are probably thinking *Okay, you've piqued my interest. Let's hear some drug war stories.*

Well, slow down, Kemo Sabe. You can't understand the story without hearing the back story. I believe the person we each turn out to be, the good traits as well as the bad, are 10% genetic and 90% environmental. In other

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words, each person's personality is the sum of all the relationships and experiences they have had during their life. Following this reasoning, I am a component of my son and daughter's personality. And for that, I offer my sincerest apologies. The story wouldn't be complete without discussing what made me "me."

You may be a bit disappointed. You may be thinking, *But I want to hear about all the fucked-up stuff you did.*

Relax! We'll get to that.

George and Callie

George and Callie, or Memaw and Pawpaw as I called them, were my mom's parents. They lived in Gadsden, Alabama until my mom was in high school, then moved to Pensacola, Florida, which is where this story takes place. They were both simple, hard-working, country folks who were the most decent and loving people I would ever meet. They're the reason a vein of humanity still runs through my caustic heart.

My parents were young when I was born. Thus, every weekend of my early life was spent at Memaw and Pawpaw's house while my parents did what people their age do: party. I absolutely loved this arrangement because, at their house, I got anything I wanted. And, being an only child, I didn't have to share.

The weekend started with a stop at the 7-11 to get a large Coke Icee. And no matter how large the drink, I always said the same thing when Pawpaw handed it to me. "Go back in that store and tell that man I want a big one!"

Next stop, Kentucky Fried Chicken. Not KFC. Not calling the chicken *fried* doesn't make it healthier. My order was always the same: four original recipe legs and mashed potatoes with gravy.

Last stop, the A&P to purchase four Morton honey buns for breakfast and a Mad magazine. One weekend, my cousin, Ryan, spent the night with me. All was well until Saturday morning came and I realized I would have to share my honeybuns.

"Can't Ryan eat something else for breakfast?" I asked with all the virtue I could muster.

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“No. Two honeybuns will be enough for you this time.” I made sure he never spent the night there again.

In addition to the countless weekends, I spent endless summers with my beloved grandparents. Memaw took me to the store one day and purchased a new pair of white tennis shoes. When we returned home, Pawpaw decided to do some yard work, and, of course, I volunteered to help him. Being four years old, I expended a lot of energy without accomplishing much. All that mattered to me was being with my grandfather. As I ran around the yard, I was suddenly intrigued by a fresh, hot pile of dog shit. I assume a *dog* left it there. Pushing a wheelbarrow, Pawpaw rounded the corner in time to see my raised foot, adorning my new shoe, hovering over the doggy prize.

“No!” he yelled. But he was too late. I stomped that pile of shit with all my might, burying my shoe. Pawpaw laughed as he cleaned it with the garden hose. Some children would have gotten their ass whipped for such behavior, but I never had to shoulder that burden. I heard them tell that story at least a hundred times over the years.

At about the same age, I discovered Pawpaw would keep my secrets. Mom had to take Memaw to the store, leaving me alone with him. As soon as her car left the driveway, I stood on his lap, grabbed him by the collar, and said, “You God damn, son of a bitch! I’ll whip your ass!”

“Wha... You will?”

“That’s right, you son of a bitch.”

He endured my verbal assault until Mom’s car pulled back into the driveway. I sat down, looking somber.

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“What’s wrong, buddy?” he asked.

“My mom don’t know I talk like that. You’re not gonna’ tell her, are ya, Pawpaw?”

“It’ll be our little secret.” I hugged his neck. He always had the clean smell of Aqua Velva.

Memaw and Pawpaw’s house was always fun and relaxing. One of my favorite pastimes was to prank them. My grandparent’s bedroom had two beds, a queen-sized bed and a single on the other side of the room. I made Memaw use the single bed so I could sleep next to Pawpaw. One night, I placed a pillow under the sheets to look as if I were already asleep and crawled under the bed. When he approached it, I reached out and grabbed his ankle, startling the shit out of him. I’m glad I didn’t give him a heart attack.

I replaced the bar of soap in their bathtub with a fake one. It looked and smelled like soap but was made of wax. After his bath, I heard Pawpaw say, “Maw, don’t buy that brand of soap anymore. I couldn’t get it to lather up.”

My love of incessant pranks came from the time I spent with Memaw and Pawpaw. My mom, however, was my favorite victim. Once I placed a realistic rubber hand in our microwave oven. That night, I heard Mom scream when she opened it.

Of all my pranks, my favorite occurred when I wasn’t there to witness it, which made it even more hilarious. I opened a large, yellow salt shaker and replaced the salt with a spring snake. The lid would barely close, but I managed to screw it on tight. I placed the shaker back on the stove and forgot about it.

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Several days later, as I pranced through the door after school, Mom told me she needed to speak to me. She said she had stayed up the night before and slept late that morning. Half asleep, she slowly shuffled into the kitchen in her slippers and nightgown and cooked a couple of eggs. With a spatula, she carefully placed them on a plate and attempted to salt them. *That's odd. The shaker feels full, but no salt will come out.* So, she opened it.

As I write these words, I'm laughing out loud. Every time I imagine that snake leaping out of the salt shaker at my unsuspecting mom, the thought always amuses me. She also said had I been home when she opened it, I wouldn't have lived to see the next day. She was just kidding. I think.

Whenever Mom took me to the 7-11 near our neighborhood, I would purchase several packs of Hubba Bubba bubble gum. Once I got home, I carefully disassembled the package, removed the gum from the wrappers, and cut a small opening in each piece with a razor blade, spiking them with garlic, cigarette ashes and cayenne pepper. Then, I reassembled the packaging, sealing it with a glue gun, and placed them throughout our house. After my parents had learned never to chew gum they found at home, I had to find new victims. I took several packs back to the 7-11 and placed them on the shelf. (What is the statute of limitations for product tampering?) I laughed myself to tears thinking about what was going to happen when someone purchased the gum. Witnessing the unsuspecting victim chewing it wasn't funny. Imagining them doing it was. Of course, using a mask of innocence to hide my culpability was thrilling as well, a common theme throughout my life.

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My favorite time with Memaw and Pawpaw was the month between Thanksgiving and Christmas. My grandparents were the thread that bound our family together. Thus, I would see relatives that time of year I never saw any other time. Of these people, my favorite was Mom's sister, Dorothy, her husband, Harwell, and their two children, Mike and Patty.

Harwell was an interesting character; I could never tell if he was joking because he never cracked a smile. I now know he was *always* joking. On one of their visits, he approached me, excited about an idea. He called it "canned pussy." I was young, so I wasn't sure what he was talking about. Plus, he looked so damn serious, I thought he was contemplating a new business venture. "You take your canned pussy," Harwell explained, "pull the lid off, and there ya' go. You can sniff it, lick it, dip it, whatever you want."

I didn't always enjoy Harwell's odd sense of humor. One summer, my parents made me pull Bahia grass from our front and back yard. The work was tedious and boring, and I did a mediocre job at best. Dorothy arrived at Memaw's house near the end of the summer and told me she had a present from Harwell. I was excited about getting a gift months before Christmas. So, what was my special gift? It was a plastic bag filled with Bahia grass. Written on the bag was the caption,

Fun Fun Fun

Damn That Fun

At the time, I didn't think the joke was funny; although now, I think it's hilarious.

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The holidays also brought out Mom's brother Rex, his wife, Joyce, and their children. My grandparents' house had numerous pictures of Rex when he was in school, some of them in his football uniform. Those days were gone. I believe people put pictures of themselves and others in places they live to remind them of how grand and attractive they used to be.

Every Christmas Eve, my family would gather at Memaw and Pawpaw's house for a party, a chance to visit and exchange gifts. One year, Rex arrived drunk and got into a physical fight with his son, Lawayne, who fled the party in tears. The entire incident ruined what was meant to be a happy occasion. At the time, if I had to assign a literary device to Rex, it would have been an antagonist. But he was actually foreshadowing.

We exchanged gifts near the end of the evening, and every year he gave me white tube socks. Who the fuck gives a child socks for Christmas? That's what your mom buys you before school starts. And every year, Mom made me thank him for the gift.

Which leads us to....

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER

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The time I spent with Memaw and Pawpaw was the most special period of my life, a fact I couldn't appreciate then. Nor could I recognize what wonderful and remarkable people they were. I had no frame of reference to compare this part of my life to. But once my youth was over, and the static of life overwhelmed me, the richness of those days became painfully apparent. I look back now and wish we could spend one last moment together, so I could tell them how much they meant to me. Why can't things just stay the way they are?

Pawpaw died on April 5, 1993. He lived to see my son, Devin, but never saw my daughter, Jordan. I saw Memaw crying in the hallway of the hospital the day he died. "How am I going to live without him?" After 57 years of marriage, that was a valid question. I made sure Devin, Jordan, and I visited her on a regular basis. As I drove home from what would be my last visit with her, I listened to the following song. To this day, I have a hard time listening to it, but the song told me what Memaw felt.

Asleep

by
The Smiths

Sing me to sleep
Sing me to sleep
I'm tired and I
I want to go to bed

Sing me to sleep
Sing me to sleep
And then leave me alone

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Don't try to wake me in the morning
Cause I will be gone
Don't feel bad for me
I want you to know
Deep in the cell of my heart
I will feel so glad to go

Sing me to sleep
Sing me to sleep
I don't want to wake up
On my own anymore

Sing to me
Sing to me
I don't want to wake up
On my own anymore

Don't feel bad for me
I want you to know
Deep in the cell of my heart
I really want to go

There is another world
There is a better world
Well, there must be
Well, there must be
Well, there must be
Well, there must be
Well....

By the time I got home, Memaw had passed away. She died on July 30, 2001. I spoke at her funeral, recalling the fun days we spent together. When I was young, I thought life would always be that wonderful. But I was wrong.

Neither George nor Callie lived to see the man I would become. And for that, I am truly grateful.

And after their passing, I never saw any of my relatives again.

Bea

Beatrice, who I called Bea, and Jack were my father's parents. By the time I was born, they were divorced, and she was married to an AT&T executive, named Russell, who I called Pappy. When I was young, I didn't quite understand how Jack fit into the picture, but every year I got an extra Christmas gift from him, so I didn't lose sleep over it. Children think that way.

Russell was an intelligent man who did something for me no one else would or could; he answered my questions. By that I mean, he satisfied my curiosity with a level of technical detail I never heard from anyone else.

For example, while at an airport, I asked him, "How can an airplane fly when they're so big and heavy?"

Instead of saying, "It's magic" or "I don't know," he explained how the shape of the wing creates a difference in pressure, which pushes the airplane up.

People sometimes think children can't understand complex ideas or are not aware of what's going on around them. Nothing could be further from the truth. My fascination with physics, engineering, and mechanics stems from Russell taking a few extra seconds to answer my questions in detail.

Jack was a private man. He was a veteran of World War II and participated in the invasion of Omaha beach. In case you're rusty on your history, that battle was a particularly nasty one, in which the Allies sustained a tremendous number of casualties. My birth is a miracle. Jack was always cordial when he visited but never stayed long. As I got older and could

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somewhat appreciate what he experienced during the war, I understood why he was so reserved. I wanted to talk to him about it but never had the courage to ask.

Jack died on October 8, 2008. Robert and I were feuding at the time, and he forbade me from attending the funeral. In death, as in life, Jack remains a mystery to me.

As close as Mom's family was, Robert's was equally distant and aloof. Except for Bea, I never spent time with any of his relatives. I was close to his grandmother, but she died when I was very young. Another peculiar characteristic of his family was they didn't have terms of endearment for me to call them. Unlike Memaw and Pawpaw, I've always called my father, "Robert" and my grandparents, "Bea" and "Jack." I called Russell, "Pappy," but he wasn't a blood relative. I don't know what that means if anything at all.

Bea was a petite, elegantly beautiful woman with an innate sense of culture. She called me her "little darling" and hung on every word I said. Every time we were together, she asked me, "What's my favorite color?"

"Blue," I always replied.

"And why is blue my favorite color?"

"Because my eyes are blue."

Bea and Russell lived in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida in a high-rise condominium. I spent two weeks there every summer. During the 70's, young children could fly without an adult as long as they wore a sign indicating such. A child abductor's dream. Every summer, I boarded an airplane wearing a cardboard picture of a cartoon cowboy with a caption that read, "Howdy Partner.

Brett Douglas

I'm a lone little doggie." The pride of traveling without my parents overshadowed any shame I felt over the silly sign hanging around my neck.

Upon arriving at their apartment, I found a pile of wrapped presents in the living room. After ripping through those, I did pretty much anything I wanted. The condo was inhabited by retired people, so I was the only child in the building. Most children would get lonely, but I always worked well alone.

A typical day at Bea's started with four packs of cinnamon sugar oatmeal with butter. Next, a trip to the swimming pool. Afterward, we watched an episode of *Days of Our Lives*, which I usually slept through. The afternoon was spent shopping, and the evening was spent at a restaurant of a quality I couldn't appreciate at my young age. The entire time, I fired questions at Russell, and he seemed genuinely happy to answer. Without the distraction of other children, my natural inquisitiveness blossomed, which resulted in a skill that positively impacted my life more than I could have ever imagined at the time.

Robert exhaustively tried to steer me into creative and productive interests. For example, pocket calculators first became available during the 70s. Although I was only eight years old, I wanted one. Unlike today's calculators, which are the same size, depth and weight as a credit card, solar powered with a liquid crystal display, and virtually free; the first commercially available ones weighed one and a half pounds, were powered by a 9-volt battery, utilized a red diode display and cost over \$100. Despite the high price, Robert bought one for me.

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He paid for guitar lessons, which I abandoned after a year. The problem was I had to practice songs like “Camptown Races” and “Yellow Rose of Texas” instead of ones I liked. He also purchased a piano and paid for lessons. He once offered me \$300 if I played *and* sung “Empty Garden” by Elton John. The song was beyond my ability, but after a month of practice, I successfully performed it. And he kept his word.

Robert is astute at seeing future trends, which is a redundant statement since seeing past trends requires no skill. I was twelve years old when he bought the first computer I ever owned, a Commodore VIC-20.

Some legacy information is required at this point. In 1979, the internet was still 10 years away. No one had a computer in their home, except for enthusiasts, nor could anyone conceive of any reason why they would want one. The VIC-20 cost \$300, which is equivalent to \$1,800 today. Despite the exorbitant price, Robert purchased it for me. Although he had no idea how computers worked or how ubiquitous they would eventually become, he somehow knew this was a sound investment.

Now let’s take a short break for....

Information Not Pertinent to the Story

To appreciate how far technology has progressed since 1979, let's compare the VIC-20 with a modern computer.

Speed

The VIC-20 had a 1 Megahertz MOS 6502 processor. The speed, 1 megahertz, means the computer can perform one million decisions every second.

In comparison, a modern processor, like the Intel Core i7, runs up to 3 gigahertz, which means it can perform 3 billion decisions every second. It also has 4 cores, which are separate processors. Thus, theoretically, up to 12 billion decisions can be made every second.

Memory

Memory, or RAM, is measured in bytes, a basic piece of information. The VIC-20 had 20 kilobytes of RAM, which equals 20,000 bytes. The machine also lacked a memory manager; when the 20,000 memory registers were full, the computer crashed and had to be restarted.

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In comparison, a modern PC can have up to 128 gigabytes of RAM, which is roughly 128 billion bytes. And memory managers are standard; modern computers never throw “out of memory” errors.

Storage

All modern computers store information using an internal hard drive. The VIC-20, however, didn’t have one. The machine didn’t even have a floppy drive. Instead, it utilized a cassette drive. And when I say *cassette*, I mean an actual audio cassette. It took five minutes to load 20,000 bytes of information, and every third time a load was attempted, the machine would throw an error, requiring the user to rewind the tape and start over.

Today, hard drives can store up to 6 terabytes, that’s 6 *trillion* bytes, of information. When the Microsoft Word icon is clicked, the base program, which is a little over 1 billion bytes, loads in two to four seconds. This process hardly ever fails.

Price

As stated earlier, the VIC-20 cost \$1,800. Today, a powerful computer will set you back about \$500, unless you own an Apple, which means you spent too much money on a toy. That’s 12,000 times the performance for 1/3 the price. The next time any of your left-wing, Occupy Wall Street, Bernie Sanders

supporting friends denounce capitalism, just have them read this section or simply point to the phone in their hand.

Anyway, back to the story. Sorry for the rant.

One summer, I decided to take my computer with me to Ft. Lauderdale. I just got it a few months earlier and would have a considerable amount of spare time. As it turned out, that decision was a fateful one.

I had a few cassettes with some games and utilities but quickly got bored. I noticed a thick manual in the VIC-20 box, emblazoned with the title, “BASIC Programing Guide.” I thought the word, “BASIC” meant “rudimentary” or “for beginners.” But it’s actually a programming language. All applications are designed with one. And BASIC is an acronym, which stands for Basic All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code.

By the time I left Ft. Lauderdale, I was designing simple programs and saving them to an empty audio cassette. By the end of that summer, I was creating a video game. Unfortunately, I used all 20 kilobytes of RAM the computer had available. So, Robert took me to the store to purchase a 32-kilobyte memory expansion cartridge. The clerk placed a rectangular shaped piece of plastic on the counter and said, “That’ll be \$200, please.”

Robert pulled me aside and asked, “Can you tell me what exactly I’m spending \$200 on?”

I explained its purpose, but I don’t think he got it. Nonetheless, he plopped the money on the counter and bought it. A month later, my video game

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was complete. At 12 years old, I had a skill that, at the time, most people didn't know existed, one which would be in high demand in the future. Today, my name should be immortalized in the pantheon of technology giants, like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. But I chose a different path.

During my visits to Ft. Lauderdale, I noticed a minor peculiarity in Bea's behavior. One morning, I woke up early and walked into the kitchen. She was sitting at the dining room table looking tired and disheveled, an unusual look for her. "Please stay in your room until I finish my coffee, darling," she mumbled. I had few rules to follow at Bea's house, so abiding by this one wasn't a problem. After she had finished her "coffee," she was her normal upbeat and cheerful self.

Bea never uttered a single cross word to me when I was young. As I grew older, however, I noticed a tension between her and Robert. The two never openly fought in front of me, but they made snide comments or passively criticized one another. Mom explained to me that Bea was cruel to Robert when he was young. She was highly critical of him and exhibited unpredictable mood swings. Bea and Jack divorced when Robert was young, and he was used as a bargaining chip. To make matters worse, Robert had to announce in court which parent he wanted to live with. He knew no matter what decision he made, he would upset someone he loved, an unwinnable situation.

Mom then used a label I had never contemplated before. "Bea is an alcoholic." The term "alcoholic" is one of those words whose definition has a depth only people affected by it can appreciate. I soon became one of those people.

Brett Douglas

The day of my high school graduation was a happy one. The ceremony was held at the Pensacola Civic Center, followed by “Beach Week,” which was a celebration at Pensacola Beach. The festive day began with my girlfriend, Adrianne, Memaw, and Pawpaw arriving at my parent’s house for food and pictures. Afterward, my parents, Adrianne and I went to the Hilton, located next to the Civic Center, to meet Bea and Jack, one of the few times I saw them together. Bea poured everyone a glass of champagne and proposed a toast to my successful future. Toasting my success with alcohol. Oh, the irony. After more pictures, we walked to the Civic Center, and, after enduring some long speeches, I walked across the stage. After the ceremony, I met everyone in the parking lot. Bea wanted us to go back to the Hilton, but Adrianne wanted to go to Beach Week, which meant drinking, drugs, and lots of sex. You can probably guess who I followed.

After Beach Week, I received a call from Bea. “I want you to know how hurt I was that you left me after your graduation.” I had never heard that tone in her voice.

“I’m sorry about that. Adrianne wanted to go to the beach and I—”

“So Adrianne is more important to you than your own grandmother?”

“Uh... no.”

“Ya’ know, you’re just like your father. Always trying to hurt me.”

Her voice was getting louder.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

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“You’re a selfish, inconsiderate asshole! You hear me. You’re just like your father. A hateful fucking asshole! After everything I’ve done for you, this is how you treat me. Who the fuck do you think you are?”

I felt like someone had kicked me in the stomach. The venom spewing from her mouth was something I was completely unprepared for. I started crying and dropped the receiver. Mom grabbed it, yelled some obscenities at Bea and hung up. The phone instantly rang, but we didn’t answer.

Once I was calm, Mom revealed a dynamic to our family I was unaware of. Bea did love me, but the kindness she bestowed had a hidden motivation. She was aware of the tenuous relationship I had with Robert and taunted him with it. To Bea, love was a competition, a bloodsport with only one winner. Much in the same way Bea used Robert to cause Jack pain, she used me to cause Robert pain.

My relationship with Bea was never the same after that phone call. A few days later, she called and started her verbal assault again.

“You’re drunk,” I stated.

“Fuck you, asshole! Who tha’ hell—”

“I know when I’m talking to a drunk person and you’re drunk. Call me when you’re sober.” I hung up. Bea never called back, and I never spoke to her again.

Beatrice died on January 11, 1999. As I stood over her coffin, I noticed, even in death, she was unusually beautiful. I realized at that moment how someone’s preoccupation with external appearances can be hiding something unattractive on the inside.

That deserves repeating.

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER

2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside

I also realized my first experiences with death involved relationships surrounding Bea. She owned a friendly, energetic poodle named Fancy. I enjoyed playing with the dog and considered her part of the family. When I was eight, Mom sat me down and told me Fancy had died. That was my first experience with the fluidity of life. Why can't things just stay the way they are?

I've often pondered the cause of grief. Am I sad over the absence of someone who brought joy to my life or the confrontation with my own mortality? Am I mourning another's loss or my own inevitable loss? Is grief selfless or selfish?

Soon after Fancy died, Russell passed away. His death marked the first funeral I ever attended. I never got to thank him for the positive way he impacted my life. Perhaps grief is spawned from regret over missed opportunities which are now forever unavailable.

I was now looking at Bea lying in her coffin. When the service started, I was stunned to see Robert and I were the only people in attendance. None of

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her family or friends bothered to show up. Her burial place was a dingy, unkempt cemetery, something out of a horror movie. A sad ending to a sad life.

As I drove home, I recalled Pawpaw's funeral. Hundreds of people from five different states attended; the service was standing room only. The procession was over a mile long. Memaw's funeral was similar. They were buried side by side in a beautiful cemetery, adorned with trees and flowers. The contrast was stark.

I realized something else...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by

Joan

Joan is my mom. Actually, that's her middle name. Her first name is Tommie, a name I love but she despises. I wanted to name this chapter Tommie, but I've done enough to upset her. My daughter was almost named Tommie, but Mom vigorously objected. I suggested Jordan Tommie, but that idea was shot down as well.

Joan is a special person. She inherited her parent's kindness and love of family. Whenever one of my friends met her, they *always* said the same thing, "You have the nicest mom."

I have heard that statement so often, I've lost count. Every time my teenage friends and I crashed at my parents' house late at night, Mom would wake up, come in the living room to say "Hello," and then make us glasses of tea or something to eat. And when she went back to bed, I heard, "You have the nicest mom."

The only time I saw Mom's dark side was when she was behind the wheel of a car. When someone was driving in a manner which was not to her liking, she sounded something like this, "Brett, first we'll go swimming, then we'll go to the souvenir shop if you want, and then... GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE WAY, YOU FUCKING ROAD WHORE... and then we'll have lunch. We'll have a great time."

I spent most of my youth with Mom. Robert worked long hours, so I became a mama's boy. She read me stories, helped with my Cub Scout group, organized my birthday parties, celebrated my victories, and comforted me

during my failures. She was always upbeat, smiling and positive, traits I have depended on my entire life.

Mom was a stay-at-home parent, so I never had to attend daycare. Consequently, I was shy in social situations. One morning, she woke me up earlier than usual and said, "Time to get up. Today's the first day of school." I had no clue what she was talking about, but I got out of bed, put on the clothes we recently purchased, grabbed my lunchbox, and got on the school bus. Kindergarten was my first interaction with other children. Everyone seemed to understand what was going on except me. To make matters worse, I was reluctant to ask the scary black lady, Mrs. Pitts, my kindergarten teacher, any questions. A few weeks went by without incident.

The Accident

Robert loved to fish, and on one particular outing, he caught a large number of mullet. I helped him clean them, which consisted of removing the scales and internal organs. I noticed some of the mullet had an organ which the other ones didn't. He explained it was an egg sack, called roe, and was good to eat.

That night, he fried the roe, using a propane fryer on our back porch. I didn't want to eat it, but Robert was insistent. Whenever I refused to eat something new, he always said the same thing, "How do you know you won't like it unless you try it?"

Fried mullet roe was delicious. I gorged myself and went to bed with an overly full stomach. The next morning on the school bus, I discovered roe has a laxative effect when consumed in excess. By the time I got to school, I had crapped in my pants but was too shy to inform Mrs. Pitts of my problem. So, I sat down and waited for the day to end. I had several more accidents, causing the other children to laugh and call me “stinky-butt.” I didn’t cry; I simply ignored them. When I finally got home, I ran into Mom’s arms, and six hours of tears fell out of me at once. She held me, calmed my anguish, cleaned me up, and promised everything would be all right. As with most things, Mom was correct. The next day at school, no one said a word about the incident.

The Challenge

Mom and I had a special routine at Christmas time. Every October, she handed me a Sears catalog. My task was to select what I wanted Santa Claus to deliver. The last twenty pages were toys. Four were for toddlers, and four more were devoted to girls, which left twelve glorious pages of the latest and greatest toys to ponder. Thus began an intense series of negotiations between Mom and me. I was instructed to mark the ones I wanted with a pen. Naturally, I went big by marking three-quarters of them. Mom then told me to cut the list in half.

The annual Christmas challenge had begun. Every spare moment for two months I studied each picture, carefully read each description, and

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methodically weighed every option in the quest to correctly make the most important decision of my life. I resubmitted the list several more times until it was of an acceptable length.

The last stage of the process was the most important. I had to inform Santa Claus of my decision. As I sat on his lap, I not only mentioned every toy on the edited list but recited verbatim the descriptions in the catalog; I had to make sure he didn't screw up and bring me the wrong toys. The man pretending to be Santa was glad to be rid of me.

On Christmas morning, everything on the list was sitting under the tree, plus a few surprises. I can't recall ever requesting something and not getting it. After I became a parent, the bittersweet notion of Santa Claus became apparent. My parents worked for the money, purchased the toys, and assembled them while some imaginary man got all the credit.

One year, I found a "Magic Hat" under the tree, which was a large, plastic top hat with a hidden door at the bottom to make items magically appear or disappear. My parents had some friends over for dinner Christmas night, and I wanted to perform a trick for everyone. I placed a stuffed rabbit in the trap door and started the illusion by tilting the hat forward, showing them it was empty. Mom told me to turn the hat upside down, which I did, causing the rabbit to fall out of the trap door. I ran out of the room. Mom followed me, apologizing profusely. Although I was embarrassed, I quickly forgot about the incident. But Karma played her hand anyway.

A short time later, PJ, a good friend of Robert's, called our house looking for him. Mom answered. "Hello?"

Brett Douglas

“Is that any way to answer the phone?” PJ quipped. “I’m gonna’ call right back, and you better answer the phone right.” He was known to joke in this manner.

Unbeknownst to Mom, I was down the street with my friend Shannon, who wanted me to spend the night. I picked up the phone and called her.

Mom’s phone rang immediately after she hung up with PJ. She picked up the receiver and said, “Hey PJ, wanna fuck?” Mom heard silence. She later told me she instantly knew she had erred.

“Mom?” I eventually said.

“Brett! Come home right now!”

“But Mom, Shannon—”

“I SAID COME HOME RIGHT NOW!”

I quickly rode my bike home. Mom sat me down and explained what I heard was just a joke. She was mortified, although I thought it was funny. To this day, she cringes whenever I bring up this story. She’ll be less than happy when she discovers I wrote about it.

Mom and I have a special relationship. She is the only person who has stood by me despite my deplorable behavior, my deceptions, my betrayal of her trust, and the purposeful destruction of everything in my life. For some reason, she’s the only one who refused to believe nothing of value existed in my damaged soul. Mom stood by me when my wife, children, father, and friends had all turned their backs. When the dreaded day comes, and she leaves this world, I will truly be alone.

Robert

Robert is my father. Being a product of Bea and Jack, he is the antithesis of Mom. I don't mean he doesn't love me, rather his expression of love, acceptance, and even his presence in my life is as conditional as Mom's love is unconditional. He has an unwavering opinion of right and wrong, success and failure, and how a man should behave. This belief is so rigid, I've always felt I wasn't the type of person he wanted as a son.

To be fair, living with me was no walk in the park. I recoiled when he attempted to be affectionate and resisted any attempts he made to get close to me, as feeble as they may have been. Much like a Terminator cyborg, not only did Robert not show emotions, he crushed other people's feelings like the T-800 trampled human skulls.

Robert isn't smart in the academic sense. But he's incredibly street-wise. He's a hustler and isn't interested in any endeavor that doesn't have some potential monetary gain. His hobbies include pool, golf, poker, and watching professional football, but only when they involve the wager of money. Robert's personal success solidified his rigid views on life, which left little room for those of us, that would be me, who didn't share those views.

Robert also uses money as a metric to measure the worthiness of others. He typically only befriends those he can benefit from financially. To be honest, I only associated with people who I could acquire drugs from. Friendship for personal gain. I guess I have more in common with Robert than I care to admit.

Brett Douglas

My father possesses an incredible insight. His ability to predict the future is a trait I've always admired. One day, a large safe appeared in our garage. "What's in tha' safe?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"So, why do we have a safe?"

"It's going in my pawn shop."

"What pawn shop?"

"The pawn shop I'm gonna' own one day," he said. I thought he was crazy. But I learned never to discount anything he said.

Robert insisted I read Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, one of the most well-known self-help books ever written. Although I told him I read it multiple times, he kept insisting I read it. I think he thought I was lying.

He claimed to have read it as well. Judging by his attitude toward me, I guess I missed the chapters *Influencing other's behavior by nurturing their self-loathing* and *Making friends by telling them how wrong they are* and *Feigning interest in others in the most disingenuous way possible*. I guess his copy of the book was a later edition.

My relationship with my father is an emotional topic, so I want to be fair and accurate when discussing it. I was not an abused child. I never missed a meal. I got any material thing I wanted and then some. I felt love and security from my family. The only deficiency I experienced during my childhood was the male archetype in my life was one I could never measure up to.

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For example, Robert believed boys should play sports, so he had me join a tee ball league. I imagine most boys watch baseball with their fathers; thus, they're familiar with the rules. I never displayed any interest in sports, couldn't throw or catch, nor did I have any clue as to how the game was played; but I muddled through the practices.

Our first game was on a Saturday morning. I was placed on the pitcher's mound during the first inning, although I had never played that position. I was the closest player to the batter, staring at a baseball sitting on a tee and a kid with a metal bat, who was about to hit the ball as hard as he could in my direction. And when he did, my survival instinct kicked in, and I hit the ground. The laughter from the bleachers told me my action wasn't the correct one. Just the first of many times I disappointed Robert.

Some fathers would have thought, *My son doesn't seem to be good at sports. Maybe we should try something else.* But instead of Robert modifying his belief to fit reality, he tried to modify reality to fit his obstinate belief.

Our next-door neighbor's son, Scotty, regularly practiced his batting skills in his backyard. Robert frequently said, "I wish you were more like Scotty." I've often wondered if Bea ever told Robert how much she preferred other children over him.

The neighbor on the other side of our house was named Sonny. While he was at work, Scotty vandalized his home and told his mom he saw me do it. When Robert got home and heard what Scotty said he witnessed, he whipped my ass. I proclaimed my innocence through my tears, but to no avail. Later that evening, Robert learned Scotty was the perpetrator, and I was telling the

Brett Douglas

truth. He was truly remorseful and apologized to me. What Robert never realized was the physical pain from a whipping I didn't deserve didn't compare to not measuring up to his standard of a son. I was never compared to Scotty, nor did his parents and my parents ever speak to each other again. But Robert wasn't ready to drop the sports idea yet.

Richie

Richie lived down the street from me. Despite the fact he was very athletic, we were close friends and had a lot of fun together. We took turns spending the night with each other on the weekends. Richie had one brother and three sisters, so I, being an only child, enjoyed the crazy commotion which permeated his house. I also had a crush on his sister, Nancy; I even kissed her once. Richie, on the other hand, enjoyed the calm he found at my house. So, I stayed at his house on Friday night, and he stayed at my house on Saturday night.

Our favorite game was a painful endeavor called "Smear the Queer." The rules were simple; run with the football as long as you could while everyone else tried to tackle and, if possible, hurt you. Richie's little brother, Robbie, always wanted to play, and we were exceptionally rough with him. The yard we played in was lined with cactus and yucca plants, both painful to the touch. Whenever Robbie had the ball, Richie and I would fall back until he ran past

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one of the plants and then push him into the thorns. If only a Smear the Queer league had existed; Robert would have been proud of me.

Robbie wanted to be included in whatever Richie and I were doing. So naturally, we tortured and tormented him unmercifully. We physically assaulted him, broke his toys, stole his food, hid from him, and called him names. Hardly an hour went by that Robbie didn't flee the room crying because of something we did to him.

Many years later, I was standing in line at a night club while the bouncer checked ID's. He was one of those huge body-builder guys you definitely didn't want to upset. When he got to my ID, he said, "Brett?"

"Yes?" I responded as I studied his face, trying to determine if I knew him.

"Do you remember me?"

"No."

"I'm Robbie."

So, this is where my life ends. Well, at least I've had fun. "Uh...Hi."

Robbie was genuinely happy to see me, and we spoke several times that night. Either he didn't recall the pain I inflicted on him or was grateful for the role I played in him getting so muscular. Either way, I dodged a bullet that night. The first of many.

Behind our neighborhood was a ditch we called the Big Hole, which was approximately 200 yards long and 25 feet deep, narrow at both ends, wide in the middle and surrounded by trees. Behind the Big Hole was a large holding

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pond. For Richie and me, this place was paradise. Some of the most epic dirt clod fights in human history occurred there.

Richie and I discovered two rusty, pedal-driven toy cars buried in the mud at the pond. We carefully removed them from their earthly tomb, took them to Richie's dad's garage, hammered the cars back into shape and painted them. Richie had recently learned a new word, which he wrote on the back of his car; the word was "twat." His mom was appalled when she saw it. I can't specifically recall where I learned most profane words, probably from Mom when she was driving, but I know exactly where I learned "twat."

Once the restoration process was completed, we took our cars back to the steepest, deepest part of the Big Hole and took turns pushing them over the side, laughing hysterically as they flipped and rolled down the hill before crashing into the ditch. After several trips down the hill, the cars were reduced to mangled pieces of rusty metal.

The next morning, the restoration process started again. Reshaped and sporting a new paint job, the cars were ready for another round of destruction. We wrote words on them like "tits" and "turd" and "tonnie," which was a word we invented that had no meaning. Afterward, we went back to the Big Hole for more demolition. This routine went on for two weeks until the cars were to the point where repairing them was hardly possible; they were wads of jagged metal.

We performed one last half-assed restoration and went back to the Big Hole for the last drop. I rolled my car first. The crash was entertaining, but after two weeks, the process was losing its thrill. I climbed down the hill to

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examine the damage. Richie, who was still at the top, announced he was rolling his car. He was directly above me, so I took two steps to the left to avoid being clobbered by his flying ball of tetanus. As soon as Richie released his car, it lunged left and started rolling straight toward me. I took three more steps, but the rolling death ball cut even further as if it were following me. I started a full run as the car reached the bottom, ripping my shirt and cutting a gash on the back of my right arm. I heard Richie's bellowing laughter from the top of the hill. I enjoyed the process of building it up then destroying it, perhaps a little too much.

Richie knew no shame, and I loved that about him. I was eating lunch one day when he called. "Come down to my house quick. You've got to see this."

"But I'm eating."

"Just get your ass down here. You've got to see this."

I jumped on my bike and pedaled down to his house. As I burst through the door, he was standing in his living room with a plastic cup in his hand, holding his other hand over the top. He held it up to my nose. "I farted," he said with pride. Richie had indeed captured his fart in the cup because I smelled it.

His obsession with excretions was legendary. He once walked into the room, dropped his shorts, bent over, spread his butt cheeks, and pushed the tip of a turd out of his asshole. He then sucked it back in. He pushed it out then sucked it in repeatedly while my friend, Geoff, and I laughed hysterically.

Once, Richie shit on a public restroom floor, picked it up with a towel, and smeared it all over the door handle. We spent the afternoon watching people grab it and smell their hand.

Like I said, I had a lot of fun with Richie.

The Dress

Richie played football and baseball, so when Scotty was no longer an acceptable comparison, Robert said, “I wish you were more like Richie.”

To make matters worse, Robert insisted the two of us go into our backyard and throw a baseball. I was always hesitant to do anything with him because I never knew if it would end pleasantly or dreadfully. For example, after I finished the game I created on my computer, Robert asked me to show him how I did it. He quickly got frustrated with the way I was explaining it and stormed out of the room, calling my effort “stupid.”

Another example, during a bowling game my parents and I were playing, Robert ruined our outing by belittling me because I added numbers in my head incorrectly. The reason I have a mathematics degree was to prove to him I am good at math, a point he never conceded.

One of the last baseball sessions in our backyard ended with him saying, “You should be wearing a dress.” I’ve often wondered if Bea ever impugned Robert’s manhood or belittled his successes.

Eventually, Robert dropped the sports idea. I guess I won, although I didn't feel like a winner.

The Human Remote

As much as I disliked Robert's unpredictable behavior, the way he treated Mom irritated me even more. When I was a child, televisions didn't have remote controls, which wasn't a problem because only three stations were available. Also, the channels were chosen by turning a dial instead of pushing buttons. If you ever hear someone on television say "Don't touch that dial" before a commercial break, that's what they're talking about. No matter which channel you happened to be watching, a dial turn to the left would lead you to the second channel and a dial turn to the right would lead you to the third one.

As Robert sat on the couch doing nothing, and Mom prepared our dinner in the kitchen, he would yell at her to drop what she was doing and change the channel for him. At this point, Mom had a 50% chance of turning the dial to the program he wanted to watch. Thus, 50% of the time she got criticized for making the wrong choice, a situation which could easily be remedied by Robert getting off his ass and changing the channel himself, allowing Mom to finish our dinner. I would seethe over his impatience with Mom, who was only trying to be helpful. I swore I would never ask a woman to do something I could do myself, a noble idea as long as I never got involved with someone who behaved like Robert.

The Dog

The difference between my mother and father can be explained best by describing what I experienced while learning to drive a car. Mom drove a Monticarlo with an automatic transmission. We began on a road in our neighborhood. She explained the function of the two pedals near the floorboard, instructed me to place my hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, and while coasting, guided me on stopping and turning until I felt comfortable driving faster. Mom always kept a calm demeanor, although she must have been terrified.

In contrast, Robert drove a white Toyota truck with a standard transmission. He failed to explain the function of the third pedal. He told me the proper hand positions were right hand on the steering wheel and left elbow hanging out the window. At that point, he simply said, "Go."

Driving a car with a standard transmission without using the clutch is impossible. Thus, Robert was forced to share some information with me. My driving was tenuous. As I started to get the hang of it, a dog walked into the road and stopped in front of the truck.

"Keep going," Robert said.

"But that dog's in the way."

"The dog will move. Now go!"

"But the dog—"

"Kill the fucking dog!" So, I lunged forward as instructed, and fortunately, the dog moved.

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I endured Robert's yelling and inconsistent instructions until I turned wide and flattened two tires on the edge of a culvert. Another failure for my father to witness.

I could go on, but you get the point. Robert's responsible for my knowledge of computers and mathematics as well as running a small business. Yet, a tension has always existed between us. Whenever we're together, I tell him what he wants to hear instead of how I truly feel in a desperate attempt to make him proud of me. He has made me a smarter, more driven and skilled person, and, at the same time, caused me to hate myself. I wish he could love me for who I am. The funny thing is I had not yet given him a reason to dislike me. But I will.

Brett

You may be thinking, *There's a drug addict somewhere in this story, right?* Well, here I am.

My parents were products of the 60's. I have Polaroid pictures of them wearing bell-bottom jeans, leather vests, round lens glasses, and headbands. They were in their teens when I was born and in the partying stage of their lives when I was young.

At the age of five, I opened my parents' sock drawer. Instead of socks, it was filled with dead plants. I didn't know what it was; I just knew none of *my* drawers were filled with that stuff.

I never saw my parents smoke pot or do any other type of drug, but I recognized changes in their behavior. When they had friends over, I noticed everyone would regularly leave the living room and go into the kitchen, followed by an odd smell which permeated the room. I didn't know what was happening. I just knew this *only* occurred when guests were over.

I have always felt disconnected from other people. I guess I still do. For the first ten years of my life, I had long blonde hair that fell past my shoulders. I was always being mistaken for a girl. My clothes were a little too "hip" for a child my age. My parents had an 8-track tape of the Broadway musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I listened to it so often, I had every word memorized, including the sound of the tape changing tracks. One morning, Mom took me to a laundry mat, where other children were playing amongst the

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clothes racks. The kids were singing nursery rhymes, none of which I was familiar with. So, I started singing the only songs I knew.

A five-year-old belting out songs from a Broadway musical may make one question my sexuality. I'm not gay, not that's there anything wrong with it. I was running around the laundry mat singing,

"Jesus Christ

Superstar

Who in the world do you think you are?"

The other parents were staring and whispering to one another, but Mom thought it was funny.

I've always looked at life differently than most. When I was six, a teenage girl in my neighborhood molested me. Instead of being traumatized, I went to her house the next day and asked her to do it again. She refused. I guess molestation is not as thrilling if the victim is asking for it.

While my teenage friends were listening to bands like Journey, Van Halen, and AC/DC, I listened to one artist and one artist only, Barry Manilow. I was very unapologetic about it. I even wore a Barry Manilow t-shirt to school. Just a reminder, I am straight.

In second grade, our teacher used an overhead projector instead of the chalkboard to teach lessons. The projector had a role of transparent film and a light source underneath, which projected an image of what was written on the film into a head, that contained a mirror which displayed it on the screen. I knew a mirror reverses an image, so I thought Mrs. Raye, my second-grade teacher, was writing backward. I couldn't see the second mirror in the head that

corrected the image. One day, Mrs. Raye asked me to write the spelling words on the projector. I panicked. I had never written backward but was too shy to say anything. The first word was “ship,” so I walked up to the projector and wrote,

qirdz

My classmates burst into laughter. I turned around to look at the screen and was amazed to see the image looked exactly how I had written it. I then examined the projector head, saw the second mirror, and understood how it worked.

“Just what are you doing?” Mrs. Raye asked.

“Nothing.” I stopped looking at the projector head.

“Erase that and write it correctly.”

The teacher thought I was trying to be funny when actually, I was trying to be normal. At the time, I thought everyone in the class understood how the projector worked except me. I now know I was the only person in the class who thought about it.

My favorite Barry Manilow song explains how I’ve felt my entire life. I think most people feel this way. At least the ones worth knowing.

All the Time

by
Barry Manilow

All the time I thought
There's only me
Crazy in a way that
No one else could be
I would have given everything I own
If someone would have said you're not alone

All the time I thought
That I was wrong
Wanting to be me
But needing to belong
I would have given everything I had
If someone would have said you're not so bad

All the time
All the wasted time
All the years
Waiting for a sign
To think I had it all
All the time

All the time I thought
There's only me
Crazy in a way that
No one else could be
I can't believe that you were somewhere too
Thinking all the time there's only you

All the time
All the wasted time
All the years
Waiting for a sign
To think I had it all
All the time

I cry every time I hear that song. Again, I really do like women.

Which leads us to my most important revelation so far, other than no tube socks for Christmas.

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better

I was at Richie's house talking to his older sister, Carol, when she mentioned she was looking for some pot. I naively informed her my parents had lots of it, and I could get some for her. When I delivered it, Carol said, "You know you can sell this stuff."

That idea had never occurred to me. Thus began my marijuana business. Although I had no idea what the street price for pot was, my efforts were quite profitable, being that my cost-of-goods was zero. I tried smoking it but never felt any effects. Unlike most of my friends, I didn't smoke cigarettes and didn't know to inhale. I actually pulled a Bill Clinton.

Almost overnight, I went from unknown loser to king of the seventh grade. My favorite clients were the popular girls who, before my new business venture, never knew I existed. Of course, they didn't really like me. They were

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just using me, an arrangement I had no problem with. I enjoyed having extra cash, but that wasn't my motivation. I finally fit in, or at least I thought I did.

The money I made went entirely toward my most intense interest: video games. Across the street from Cordova Mall, a closed Waffle House had been converted into a video arcade called The Silver Nugget. Imagine 1200 square feet packed with the classics: Space Invaders, Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, Dig-Dug, Missile Command, Centipede, Joust, Tron, Food Fight, Dragon's Layer, Tempest, Galaga, and the greatest video game ever created, Robotron. Modern arcade games are designed to be unbeatable, forcing you to keep putting quarters in the machine to continue playing. Classic games can be played forever on one quarter, if you have the skill.

As early as fifth grade, I spent every possible moment there. Every day after school, I mowed neighbors' lawns in preparation for the weekend. Saturday morning, I eagerly endured the hour-long bicycle ride to the Silver Nugget and spent the remainder of the weekend blowing every dime I made during the week.

Now, I was selling grass instead of cutting grass to finance my obsession. Some evenings, my parents drove my friends and me up to the Silver Nugget. I played games while they got stoned outside.

One night before closing time, Richie and I were playing Space Fury. When the game ended, a one-eyed, green alien appeared and insulted the player. Richie quickly ran out of lives, while I continued. As he stepped back, he bumped into my parents, who were waiting for me to finish so they could take us home. Richie knew my propensity for profane verbal outbursts after an

intense video battle. Silver Nugget management had warned me multiple times about my coarse language, but I was their best customer, so what could they really do about it. Naturally, he didn't warn me of my parent's proximity. When the green alien started talking smack, I slammed my extended middle finger against the glass and screamed, "Fuck you, cocksucker! I fucked your mother up her fat ass!"

I turned to see my parents staring at me, rather surprised, while Richie stood behind them laughing. That moment was the first time they heard me use profanity, as well as refer to oral and anal sex.

The fateful day finally arrived when I learned to inhale. Carol came to my house to get more weed and asked if I wanted to smoke some. I explained to her I was immune from marijuana's effect. But she knew better. We went on my back porch, and she taught me the proper way to smoke pot. Moments later, while *The People's Court* was on television, I rolled on the floor of my living room, laughing at Doug Llewelyn's face. I LOVED marijuana. I never sold any of my parents' pot again.

For the sake of dramatic license, I wish I could say the experience with Doug Llewelyn's face was the first time I got high, but that wouldn't be accurate. My first "high" occurred when I was twelve years old. I found four small Ziploc bags of white powder in a family member's boot. I had never witnessed anyone do cocaine before, but somehow, I knew exactly what to do. I got a straw from the kitchen and snorted the first bag. My plan was to replenish it with a pinch from the other three. I certainly looked like an amateur, because I used the entire straw instead of a short section of it. The second I lifted my

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head, euphoria enveloped my body. The sensation was even better than the one I got from rubbing our silk comforter on my penis. Within minutes, all four bags were empty. I filled them with flour and put them back where I found them.

Suddenly, an urge overcame me, a desire I would wrestle with the rest of my life. Robert had an 8mm projector in his closet along with a stack of films, which I had watched without his knowledge. The reels were pornographic movies starring John Holmes. I had no idea I was watching a legend at work. Although I had never witnessed drug use, I had seen the sex act multiple times. As I stood in my kitchen, grinding my teeth, I felt an intense need to have sex. I hadn't gone through puberty yet, but cocaine has always affected me that way. I invited a girl named Cheryl to my house and asked her to disrobe. She was two years younger than I, so her answer was "No." Oh, well. I still had the silk comforter.

Some people who try drugs gateway into harder drugs. The progression is usually cigarettes, then marijuana, then narcotics. Of course, I never did anything correctly. I started with narcotics, then marijuana, then cigarettes. At least this screw-up is one Robert wasn't aware of.

After the incident with Carol, my daily routine changed. I informed my classmates the pot store was closed. Every morning, I left for school thirty minutes early, walked to the woods behind the park in our neighborhood and got stoned. I performed this ritual every day until I graduated from high school. Occasionally, I brought a joint into the school, asked the teacher to be excused from class, smoked half of it in the bathroom and threw the other half in the

Brett Douglas

toilet without flushing. When the bell rang to go to the next class, I saw Dean Carl, whose niece I was dating, and the other deans running up and down the halls with their walkie-talkies, trying to find the culprit. Who would ever suspect the guy wearing the Barry Manilow shirt? After the first time I did this, the Washington High School administration had the doors to the bathroom stalls removed. But that didn't stop me. Every time I heard a fellow student complain about the lack of stall doors, I laughed to myself.

Burgess

I met Burgess in eighth grade. He was a tall, lanky kid who had an awkwardness that surpassed my own. The first time I saw him was during PE class while a group of black kids was harassing him.

"Get over here, cracker!" one of them yelled.

Burgess walked over to him.

"Get on your fucking knees!"

"Uh...Okay."

The black kid crammed Burgess's face into his crotch.

"Uh...Sorry. You're not my type," he said as he stood and walked away.

I told Burgess I thought his response was funny and never mentioned the incident again. We became friends.

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Eventually, Burgess got a driver's license. That weekend, we went out, which was my first taste of autonomy. With the help of Burgess's older sister, we bought a six pack of beer, loaded up in his mom's Cadillac, and hit the road. Being the first time I drank alcohol, I was drunk after two beers. As we aimlessly drove around enjoying our new-found freedom, we approached the intersection at Ninth Avenue and Airport Boulevard. The traffic light turned yellow, so Burgess floored the accelerator. We hit the incline at the intersection and went airborne on the other side. The Cadillac bottomed out hard. We pulled into a parking lot to examine the damage and discovered we had ripped a hole in the gas tank, causing a steady stream of gasoline to pour out. But the night was young, and we were both drunk. So, we drove the Cadillac until it stalled, then pushed it the rest of the way to his house. Burgess quietly went inside and came back out with the keys to his Dad's Audi. We were off again.

Although we did nothing but drive around Pensacola, I had the time of my life. When Burgess took me home, I looked at him and said, "Tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night it is," he smiled.

"Awesome!" I was hooked.

The following evening, I brought something better than beer. Burgess's first experience with marijuana was like mine. He loved it. Thus began our weekend ritual of going out Friday and Saturday night, getting stoned and looking for trouble.

My parents must have become aware of me stealing their weed because they started hiding it much more carefully. Therefore, we had to find other

sources. One we frequently used was a bar in a shady section of town which was located behind a Racetrack gas station. We cleverly called that spot the Racetrack. All we had to do was pull up to the bar, roll the window down, and ten black arms would extend into the opening, each holding a bag of weed. We simply made our choice and gave that person the money. Sometimes the pot was high quality, and other times it had the consistency of powder, which Burgess called “particle pot.” Either way, we got high.

One of our favorite stoned activities was admiring mailboxes. The goal was to find the prettiest one and destroy it with a baseball bat. One evening, with Geoff and Cheryl in tow, I suggested an upscale neighborhood off Scenic Highway. After perusing the available targets, I found a dandy. The mailbox was shaped like a house, with real shingles on the roof and ceramic numbers on each side. I crawled out of the car window and swung. The first strike shattered the numbers on one side. The second destroyed the numbers on the other. The subsequent strikes hit the top, flattening the little house until it was demolished.

Without warning, a truck bolted from the driveway. Burgess floored the accelerator, pulled up to Scenic Highway and made a wide right turn without slowing down. The truck screeched around the corner and pulled up right behind us. He pushed the Cadillac to 80 mph, but the truck stayed on our bumper. As we rounded a slight corner, we saw a traffic light ahead, and it was red. Burgess ran it, swerving left to avoid a car in the intersection. The truck did the same.

The four of us were frantically yelling out different suggestions, when someone bellowed, “Throw the beers at him.” For some reason, that idea seemed

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like a good one. I hung out the window and threw a full beer at the truck, which exploded on the grill. In response, it lunged forward and tapped our rear bumper, causing the Cadillac to fishtail.

Everyone was screaming as Burgess struggled to maintain control. As the Cadillac straightened, a car pulled in front of us, turning left onto Scenic Highway. Burgess locked the brakes. We heard the truck squealing to a stop behind us. We quickly swerved, rushed past the car in front of us, turned right into a neighborhood, and ran four stop signs before turning on Bayou Boulevard. We looked behind us. No truck. But before we could exhale, it swerved around the corner and quickly raced up on us. Burgess got up to 80 mph again. The truck, matching our speed, hit our bumper, sending us skidding sideways onto the shoulder. Burgess maintained his composure and righted the car. He was so preoccupied, he didn't notice another red light ahead. We ran through the intersection, going airborne on the other side. Thankfully, no one was traveling in the other direction. When we looked back, the truck had stopped at the traffic light.

Burgess wasted no time. He quickly turned right into the Cordova Mall parking lot, raced across Pensacola Junior College, then turned right on College Parkway. We were amazed to see the truck racing through the mall parking lot in our direction. Again, Burgess floored the accelerator, but I suddenly saw a way to end this nightmare. "Pull behind this funeral home on the right," I yelled.

"But he'll see us."

"Just do it."

Burgess quickly turned into the funeral home, pulled behind the building, and killed the lights. We ducked down and waited. Thirty minutes passed before we were brave enough to look out. The truck was gone. Thus ended our recreational mailbox hunting.

The Business Venture

Burgess and I needed a source of income to finance our weekend plundering. Since selling our weed was not an option, I had to go a different route. Nicky was an acquaintance from our neighborhood, whose mom, Vicky, disliked me immensely. She volunteered at the school and was privy to all my indiscretions. She was convinced I would turn out to be someone who was always in trouble and did drugs. I guess I can't fault her insightfulness.

Nicky was making money at school selling cinnamon toothpicks for a quarter each. The manufacturing process was simple: take several thin toothpicks and soak them in cinnamon oil, which was an incredibly potent extract. The oil was so powerful it would blister your skin after prolonged contact. Nicky had the hottest toothpicks available, claiming to have soaked them for an entire year. I didn't believe that claim, so I tried to think of a way to undercut him. I soaked some thick toothpicks, but they were too dense and wouldn't absorb the oil. After several unsuccessful attempts, I microwaved twenty thick toothpicks for thirty seconds in the oil. My entire house smelled like cinnamon, causing my eyes to burn and water profusely. The end result,

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however, was magnificent. The thick toothpicks were infused with the cinnamon oil and translucent when held up to the light. They were also insanely hot. I could sell these for fifty cents each, making forty to sixty dollars a week and, as an added bonus, put Nicky out of business. The next morning, I wrapped the twenty powerful toothpicks in aluminum foil, shoved them in my pocket, and headed off to school. When Nicky learned of my superior product, he asked to see a sample. He scratched his head in bewilderment, unsure as to how I pulled it off. I told him I soaked the toothpicks for two years, but he knew I was full of shit.

An unforeseen problem arose after my first day of sales. When I got home, I had a blister on my leg from the oil seeping through the aluminum foil. Transportation turned out to be the biggest challenge to my new business venture. I placed the toothpicks in a plastic bag, but the oil melted it, leaving a larger blister on my other leg. Next, I placed the picks in a plastic aspirin bottle, but they melted and fused themselves to the sides. I found a metal pill bottle with a rubber seal, but the oil melted the gasket, sealing the bottle shut. I acquired another pill bottle and removed the gasket, but the oil seeped out, causing another blister.

While I wrestled with this problem, another one presented itself. A fat, retarded-looking bully named Chuck, a good example of why inbreeding is a bad idea, asked for a toothpick. As I fished one out, he slammed me against the wall and stole my remaining toothpicks as well as the money I had. At least this was an easier problem to solve.

When I got home, I urinated in a bowl and microwaved four toothpicks until they were translucent with my glorious piss. I wrapped them in foil and went to school. On cue, Chuck approached me for another toothpick, except this time a crowd had gathered, waiting to see how I would respond. I demanded the money up front, but Chuck once again slammed me against the wall.

“Here. This is everything I got,” I said as I handed him the four toothpicks. I watched Chuck chew one as he walked away. When he was gone, I announced to everyone that I had, in essence, pissed in Chuck’s mouth. He never assaulted me again. Burgess and I had a well-deserved laugh, but unfortunately, business suffered after the addition of the new flavor.

And I never did solve the transportation problem.

Cheryl

Cheryl, the object of my failed, cocaine-induced, pre-pubescent seduction, eventually became my first love. She was short with wavy, brunette hair, a slight country drawl, an incredible smile, and a slightly turned-up nose, a feature I find irresistible. (I love you, Sandra Bullock.) She also possessed my favorite physical attribute in a woman, big breasts.

And now some background information on...

My Inexplicable Affinity for Breasts

Like all heterosexual males, I love breasts, and I'm not sure why. I had a Princess Leia action figure when I was young and constantly ran my thumb over her plastic breasts. I watched *Gilligan's Island* just to gawk at Ginger's tits. I even got aroused while watching Bugs Bunny's boobs when he was in drag.

Once, Mom took me to a clothing store. As I sat in the front of the shopping cart, I saw a topless mannequin and blurted out, "Hey Mom! Look at her big titties!" The woman standing next to the mannequin gave us a dirty look.

The best example of how breasts distort my judgment occurred many years later. I was employed at K-Mart as a floater, which meant I worked on the floor when needed and at a cash register the remainder of the time. The cashier manager was a young lady named Christy. She had curly, blonde hair and basketball-sized breasts. To make matters worse, or better, she always wore tight sweaters. I'm getting an erection as I write this. Naturally, I fell in love but was too shy to tell her how I felt. Once though, I came close. I was working on a register when Christy approached me. "What are you doing later?"

"Nothing. You want to go get some ice cream?"

"I meant do they need you on the floor later. I need someone to cover lunch breaks."

Ice cream! Are you fucking kidding? If I had said, "You want to go have some drinks?" or "Can I take you to dinner?" then I would get an opportunity to touch her breast. But ice cream? I'm such a moron.

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A couple of weeks later, my friend, Monique, picked me up from work. As I sat in her car, Christy walked by.

“There’s that girl I told you about,” I said to Moe as I rolled the window down. “Hey Christy, come here.”

“Hi,” she said, leaning in the window.

“Uh...do you work tomorrow?” I asked, struggling to maintain the conversation.

“No, thank God. I’m going to a party tonight. You wanna come?”

“I’d love to. Oh, this is my friend Monique.”

“Hi,” Moe said, with an unusually large grin on her face.

Christy wrote her phone number on a piece of paper. “Call me later.” she said as she winked and walked away. Finally, her breasts were within reach.

“What do you think of her?” I asked Moe.

Monique had the most unique and animated laugh I have ever heard. She started laughing. “Brett, she’s fucking ugly. Have you ever looked at her face?”

Moe was right. I was so mesmerized by her tits, I never bothered to look at her face. I never called Christy. Two weeks later, I quit K-Mart.

Okay, enough about breasts.

Cheryl was a true joy to be around. We decided to be each other’s “first.” For some reason, we had our first sexual encounter in the back seat of Burgess’s Cadillac in the Pensacola Beach parking lot. Even though it was full

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of people, we didn't care. It was over in fifteen seconds. The worst sexual performance of my life was also the most memorable. I looked into Cheryl's eyes, and my heart melted. I felt real love for her and thought she would be the woman I would spend the rest of my life with. I guess first loves are like that. I was definitely head over heels. Every love after Cheryl was heels over head.

After that evening, we were inseparable. Cheryl was my new silk comforter, and I couldn't keep my hands off her. We also discovered something else we enjoyed as much as sex: marijuana. After getting stoned, Cheryl, with her beautiful, country drawl, would say, "Brett. I'm horny. I wanna fuck." For us, weed and sex went hand in hand.

Robert gave me a red AMC Gremlin when I was old enough to drive. Although it was rather odd-looking, some of the best times of my life occurred in that car. My refusal to perform any type of maintenance on the car caused a tremendous amount of strife between Robert and me. I also stopped doing my chores around the house. Responsibility caused the party to stop, so I resisted the idea. Robert took my laziness as purposeful defiance. Out of frustration, he once beat me with a belt as I lay in bed. But my failure to follow instructions was not intentional. I suffered from tunnel vision. Only two things occupied my mind:

- 1) Getting stoned with Cheryl
- 2) Having sex with Cheryl

I simply didn't think of anything else.

I always had a bag of weed and rolling papers in the glove box of the Gremlin. After getting stoned, Cheryl and I would pull over and have sex where

ever we happened to be: parking lots, vacant houses (a real estate agent walked up on us once), on the beach, and in front of churches.

We had a ritual when it came to marijuana. After we smoked most of a joint, one of us would say, "Roach it." Then, the other one extinguished it on an unblemished spot on the center console, which was covered with circular burn marks and had become a stoner scorecard of sorts. Afterward, Cheryl placed the unsmoked portion in a bag of roaches we kept in the glove box.

Once, after smoking weed for hours, Cheryl unexpectedly said, "Roach it." As instructed, I found a spot on the center console and extinguished the mostly unsmoked joint. A few minutes later, she looked at me with her beautiful, red, squinty eyes and asked, "Why did you put the joint out?"

"Because you said 'Roach it.'" That caused a long round of uncontrollable laughter, the type that hurts your sides and goes on so long you forgot why you were laughing.

We now had a running joke. The next time we got stoned, Cheryl took two hits off the joint and said, "Roach it." The time after that, I took one hit and said, "Roach it." Next, I put the lighter to the joint without taking a hit and said, "Roach it." And the time after that, I was rolling a joint when Cheryl knocked it out of my hands, flinging pot everywhere, and said, "Roach it."

One of our favorite stoned activities, other than reducing the mailbox population in Pensacola, was screaming at people. Cheryl saw an elderly man standing in his front yard, so she rolled down the window and hung her busty self out of the car. "Hi!" she yelled at the old man, smiling and waving at him

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in a friendly manner. When the man turned, smiled and waved back, Cheryl extended both of her middle fingers and screamed, "Fuck you, asshole!"

The Three Mile Bridge, which leads to Pensacola Beach, had a fishing pier which ran alongside it. Every time we drove to the beach, Cheryl would hang out the window and scream at the people who were fishing, "Catch your fucking lunch, you broke motherfuckers!"

Without a doubt, the best, or worst depending on how you look at it, example of this rather pointless behavior occurred when we drove past Truman Arms, the most dilapidated housing project in Pensacola. "Brett, pull in here."

"Why tha' hell you wanna go in there?"

"Just do it. It'll be funny."

The purpose of our trip that evening was to purchase some weed, so Cheryl held our only twenty-dollar bill in her hand. As we drove through Pensacola's worst ghetto, she leaned out the window and yelled, "Niggers suck! Fuck all niggers!" Black people started coming out of their houses. Cheryl continued, "That's right, niggers. I'm talking to you. Fuck you!"

She suddenly sat back in her seat. "Brett. Stop the car. I dropped the twenty."

"What the fuck were you holding the twenty for?"

"Just stop."

I abruptly stopped the car and jumped out. I saw the twenty-dollar bill lying thirty yards behind our car, with a group of black guys running toward us not far behind. I ran toward the mob, grabbed the twenty, accidentally dropped it, turned and grabbed it again, jumped back in the car and quickly pulled away,

just as the crowd reached us. We couldn't laugh about the incident until we got stoned.

My relationship with Cheryl was as fun and care-free as a love affair could possibly be. We had no previous relationships to haunt us, no preconceived notions to hinder us, and no responsibilities. Our love was shiny, new and unblemished, like the dinner plates on the Titanic. But as we all know...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually

The Condom

Mom planned a trip to Vero Beach to see Dorothy and Harwell and wanted me to go. I dreaded being away from Cheryl. When we weren't together, time seemed to crawl while I anxiously waited for the moment I could

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be by her side. The last time I endured this torture was when my parents took me to Dallas to spend a week with their friends, Kenneth and Phyllis. They had profited handsomely from the savings and loan scandal during the 80's, and Robert wanted to visit them. One night, the adults went out for the evening, leaving me alone in Kenneth's house. As soon as they pulled out of the driveway, I cranked up the hot tub, grabbed a bottle from the liquor cabinet, and had a drink. By the time I got in, I was drunk. I discovered what most seasoned drinkers already know. Whatever emotion I am feeling most acutely, even if I'm suppressing it, will be amplified by ingesting alcohol. I missed Cheryl in the worst way and openly wept the entire evening.

The day before my departure to Vero Beach, Cheryl and I had sex. The session was a lively one because once we finished, I discovered the condom was ripped. Cheryl was visibly shaken by the idea of pregnancy. Although I was freaking out as well, I tried to keep a calm demeanor. "Forget about it for the next week. When I get home, we'll decide what to do. We'll face this together," I said, feigning confidence.

The next day, as we drove the seven-hour trip to Dorothy's house, I imagined telling Robert about my predicament. I shook with fear at the thought; being honest with him was inconceivable. By the time we arrived at Vero Beach, I knew what I was going to do. I had recently read of a person who successfully committed suicide by swallowing an entire bottle of aspirin. I decided I would take my own life, with or without Cheryl.

I was withdrawn and distant at Dorothy's house, and my family noticed. I spent the entire week sulking in her living room, repeatedly listening

to a song that reminded me of Cheryl. Every time I looked at any of my family members, I thought, *This is the last time I'm going to see you.* The visit was excruciating.

Upon our return to Pensacola, I immediately ran to Cheryl's house, mentally rehearsing the specific words I would use to explain the course of action I had decided to take. Yet, when I saw her, I noticed her beautiful smile and a complete lack of distress. "I had my period," she said. I felt like I had just exhaled after holding my breath for a week. I never told her I had contemplated suicide. I wish I could say that was the only time I would ever consider it.

The next day, Cheryl approached me, crying. "I need to tell you something. I can't keep this secret from you anymore. I made out with Gene while you were gone."

Her revelation hit me hard. I couldn't understand why she would betray me like that, especially with such a brainless douche. This book has no chapters titled Gene.

Looking back, I should have recognized Cheryl's feelings for me. She never had to tell me her secret, and I would have never known. Apparently, the deception was more than she could bear. That level of guilt only occurs when someone truly loves you. I wish I had realized that and been more forgiving.

Cheryl and I drifted apart. She started dating my friend, Doug, and I started dating Adrienne. We made love one last time a few years later, then I never saw her again.

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I hope Cheryl reads these words one day. I want her to know my time with her was one of the best times of my life. Our love was the purest, uncluttered by past wreckage and unfettered by the static of the outside world or my own internal flaws.

I almost forgot. One night, I saw Gene's car on the side of the road. With a hammer, I smashed out the windows, and riddled the sides with dents and holes.

he he he...

Geoffrey

Like Richie, I've known Geoff since kindergarten. I consider him the best friend I ever had, although we haven't spoken in a while. No matter what depth I sank to, he was always there for me. True friends are difficult to find.

At school, Geoff was known as "The King of the Potheads." I would imagine school today is not quite as self-segregated as it was in the 80's. Back then, everyone separated into their own cliques. The groups were as follows:

- 1) The Jocks (sports ass-wipes and the popular guys)
- 2) The Ra-Ra's (cheerleaders and the popular girls)
- 3) The Preppies (now referred to as "metrosexuals")
- 4) The Potheads (self-explanatory)
- 5) The Bro's (today known as the Bra's)
- 6) The Nerds (smart kids, sci-fi dorks, gays, psychopaths, etc.) (This was my group.)

The Muslim, Asian, and Latino kids were ignored.

Geoff and I were walking home from school when he suddenly made a confession. "I slept with a man last night."

I had a mental image of two hot dogs bumping end to end. *How do two men have sex?* During the 70's and 80's, homosexuality was not as open as it is now. It was kept out of sight, a tendency that was slowly changing. During the 80's, a situation comedy, called *Soap*, had the first openly gay character, played by Billy Crystal, to appear on television. I watched the show regularly and never noticed he was gay. But I didn't realize *The Village People* were gay

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until the 90's, so that's not saying much. The show was quite controversial and came on later than most.

My friends and I would call each other names like *faggot*, *queer*, *dick-muncher*, *cock-bite* and *fucker of men's assholes*. Okay, that last one we never used. Yet, I never thought about what those words meant. When I called Richie a "faggot," I didn't believe he had sex with men. Males frequently use demeaning names to express friendship. When we played "Smear the Queer," we never thought of the person with the football as a homosexual. When I called Geoffrey a "cock-bite," I never considered him actually putting a cock in his mouth, although he probably would be open to the idea. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but Geoff's revelation cured me of an intolerance which plagues some people to this day. Intelligence has a lot to do with it.

Geoff asked me not to divulge his secret to the people at school, and I never did. We joked about how he should have been called, "The Queen of the Potheads." If those Neanderthals at school had ever discovered the truth, they would have shit in their Wranglers.

Geoff's appetite for marijuana was rivaled only by mine and Cheryl's. He benefitted immensely from my pre-inhale period, but welcomed a new member to the pothead group, although my Barry Manilow shirt prevented me from fitting in entirely. But Geoff had an appetite for something I never developed: alcohol. You thought I was going to say "penis," didn't you? Come on. Don't lie. On more than one occasion, I was awakened by a drunken Geoff knocking on my bedroom window.

"Hi," he slurred.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” he repeated.

“What’s up?” I already knew the answer to that question.

“I don’t know where my car is?”

“Dude, it’s a school night.”

“Can I crash here?” Geoff already knew the answer to that question.

“Of course. But let’s go find your car first.”

I got dressed, helped Geoff stagger to the Gremlin, smoked a joint with him, and searched for his car, which was never far away. Mom had grown accustomed to finding my friends passed out on our couch.

I don’t mean to imply I never drank alcohol. I did. I just preferred marijuana. My parents went to see *The Rolling Stones* in New Orleans, which meant I had the house to myself for the weekend. Upon learning of my parents’ impending absence, Geoff said, “Let’s have a party.”

Initially, I rejected the idea. Having never thrown a party, I was concerned about my parents finding out as well as the condition of their house when they returned. Geoff reassured me I had nothing to worry about. Facebook didn’t exist, so we had to invite people to the party face-to-face. I call it Facelook. I invited a few friends from the neighborhood. He invited the entire school.

In preparation, we moved anything that was at risk of being damaged or stolen from the living room to my bedroom. One of the items was a piece of artwork Mom had created. It consisted of a large piece of stained plywood surrounded by a wood frame. The wood had a series of nails driven into it, with

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yellow and orange yarn threaded around them, creating an intricate, three-dimensional star pattern. The art was definitely disco-era. My daughter would kill or die for that piece today.

On the night of the party, the house quickly filled with people, most of whom I didn't know. Luckily, they brought more liquor than we could possibly drink in one evening. As a bonus, someone noticed an eight-foot marijuana plant growing in Scotty's backyard, which was quickly uprooted and shoved in our microwave to dry. We now had more pot than we could possibly smoke in one evening. The party was shaping up nicely.

Mary Jane (not the drug, an actual person), was one of the first people to arrive, and quickly got sloppy drunk. Her father was a police officer and a good friend of my mom. So, Mary Jane lied to him about her plans for the evening. The phone rang and I, expecting someone I didn't know asking for directions, answered. "Hello?"

"Is this Brett?"

"It sure is."

"This is Mary Jane's father. Is she over there with you?"

"Yeah, she's right here."

"Can I speak to her?"

"Sure." Without placing my hand over the receiver, I said, "Hey Mary Jane, it's your dad."

The entire room fell silent. Her face froze with fear. Suddenly, everyone started whispering, "Tell him she's not here. Tell him she's not here."

I know her father heard what was being said, but, with no better idea on how to proceed, I said, “Uh... She’s not here.” My response sounded more like a question than a statement.

“You tell her to get her ass home right now, or I’m coming to get her.”

The thought of a cop, who was also a friend of my mom, witnessing our debauchery was one I didn’t entertain for long. “Mary Jane, you’ve got to go home.” We gave her mints, toothpaste, and perfume to mask the smell of alcohol. But we couldn’t do much for her staggering and slurred speech.

As the night progressed, a bottle of Seagram’s was dropped in the kitchen, stripping the wax from the tile and creating a large discolored spot on the floor. A fight broke out in the living room, ending with the entertainment center being destroyed. And if all this wasn’t enough, a couple had sex in my bedroom while lying on Mom’s artwork, stripping the yarn from the frame. How drunk and horny must you be to have sex on an actual bed of nails?

Geoff informed me our friend, Erica, was passed out in my parent’s bedroom. I found her sprawled across the bed. I closed the door, leaned down and shook her until she stirred. She tried to kiss me, which I averted.

“What time do you have to be home?”

“Midnight, baby. I always thought you were cute,” she mumbled.

“Okay, we’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“Fuck it. Take my clothes off.”

I had a decision to make. I could...

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- a) Stand her up, get her as alert as possible, and help her home,
or
- b) Strip her clothes off and go “John Holmes” on her ass.

As hard as this may be to believe, I went with option a).

With Erica’s arm around me, we left the party and started walking. Her house was several blocks away; making her curfew wouldn’t be a problem. She was quite inebriated; I struggled to keep her moving. But we finally made it to the edge of her yard. All the lights in her house were on.

“Okay, we’re here. See ya’ later.” I turned to walk away.

“No, Brett. Walk me to the porch.”

Although it was only twelve steps away, the short walk would provide plenty of time for an angry father to emerge from the house with a double barrel shotgun and blow my head clean off my shoulders.

“Let’s go.” I put my arm around her and started what seemed like the mile-long trek to the porch, anticipating death at any moment. But we reached it intact.

“Alright, Erica. I gotta go.”

“No, Brett. Walk me to the door.”

I guess I could use her body as a shield. I wished I had chosen option b). In three steps, we made it to the door.

“Okay. Good luck.”

“No, Brett. Walk me to my bedroom.”

I once knew a joke that started like this. I opened the front door and pushed her in. I heard the thud of her body hitting the floor as I started to run, waiting for yells or shotgun blasts or a car running me down. But I made it back to the party in one piece.

After everyone had left, the house and front yard were littered with trash and beer cans. Unsmoked marijuana was left in the microwave, the floor in the kitchen was ruined, the entertainment center was in pieces, and Mom's artwork was destroyed. As promised, Geoff helped me pick up the trash, wax the kitchen tile and rebuild the entertainment center. Of course, we got stoned first.

Lastly, we turned our attention to the piece of artwork in my bedroom. Luckily, only half of the star pattern was unraveled. All we had to do was restring the bottom half by following the pattern on the top. Four hours later, we were finished. It definitely didn't look the same. The restrung yarn sagged as if the bottom half of the star was experiencing a greater force of gravity than the top. Nonetheless, the house was cleaner than it was when my parents left for New Orleans. I thought my bases were covered.

Of course, I had overlooked a few details. First, since I had never picked up a broom, mop or vacuum cleaner in my life, the house being so clean was suspicious. Second, the kitchen floor being freshly waxed was a tip-off for the aforementioned reason. Third, the artwork hanging in the living room had endured some trauma since their departure.

But perhaps the least subtle clue was the barrage of angry phone calls Mom received from fathers, including Erica's and Mary Jane's, telling her I had

sent their daughters home drunk. Mom confronted me, but she never told Robert what she learned. She frequently withheld information from him to keep the peace.

The Whale Heart

I loved being around Geoff because he always wanted to get high, and, once we did, I never knew what was going to happen. He made a ceramic “whale heart” in art class, which was actually a party bong. We spent countless hours sitting around it smoking pot. Upon seeing it in Geoff’s room, his mom asked, “Is that what you guys smoke your cocaine in?” We laughed at her silly question. “No one *smokes* cocaine.” I would eventually learn how dreadfully wrong we were.

One evening, Geoff, Richie, Cheryl, and I sat around the whale heart getting stoned while discussing ways of getting even with Geoff’s neighbor, Carrie, who he had an ongoing disagreement with. I thought we were engaging in harmless, stoned banter, when Geoff suddenly stood and said, “I know what to do.”

We followed him into his mom’s bathroom, where he retrieved a tampon. Next stop, the den, where he grabbed a piece of paper and a pen. Last stop, the kitchen, where he pulled a bottle of red food coloring from the cabinet. Geoff wrote a letter that went something like this...

Dear Carrie,

I've been watching you, and you've got the goods. I want to shave your pussy, roll the hairs in a joint and smoke them. Can you eat some Mexican food and shit on my face?

The note was longer, but you get the idea.

Next, he soaked half the tampon in the food coloring. We quietly walked up to Carrie's front door, hung the dripping tampon on her door knob, placed the note on her doormat, rang the doorbell and ran.

Carrie didn't see the humor in the gag and called the police. I guess she thought she had a secret admirer, who not only left her a used tampon but also wanted to express his love by smoking her snatch hairs. Geoff had to go to court over the incident. I had a mental image of the State's Attorney reading that note aloud in court while holding up an evidence bag containing a bloody tampon.

That night was just a typical evening with Geoffrey. While other people stared in disbelief, I was always by his side, laughing my ass off.

One evening, Burgess drove Geoff and me downtown to pick up his sister from a club. He parked the car in an alley, which was facing a sidewalk lined with pedestrians. Once Burgess left, Geoff jumped in the back seat with me and said, "Let's make those people think someone's fucking in here."

We rolled the windows down. I took my shoes and socks off and stuck my bare feet in the air. As he rocked the car back and forth, I started yelling, "Uh...uh...oh yeah, baby... fuck me... uh...uh...fuck me good, baby... your cock is so big."

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We were drawing a nice crowd when a police officer tapped his flashlight on the rear window of the car. Geoff and I poked our heads up from the back seat. I would guess he was more familiar with this scenario than I.

"This is not what it looks like," I explained, trying to look as non-gay as possible.

"I don't want to know what you are doing. Just stop," the cop replied.

The Moon

Geoff, Richie and I regularly got stoned in the woods near our neighborhood, the same location I smoked weed before school every day. Goya Road, which led out of our neighborhood, ran alongside it. Whenever we did this, Geoff got the urge to jump in front of cars and show his bare ass to them. As the sun set and he mooned cars, I remembered Mom telling me to come home before dark. I left them in the woods. When I got home, she informed me we had to go to the grocery store. As we drove down Goya Road, someone jumped in front of our car, pulled their pants down and presented their ass to us.

"Was that... Geoffrey?" Mom asked.

"Uh...I don't think so," I said, trying to cover for him.

"No, that's definitely Geoffrey."

That incident was when I learned...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood

Geoff and I were partying with some friends in a hotel room when he noticed a vending machine in the hallway. "Let's steal it," he said. So, we dragged it over to the elevator, placed it inside, and went to the ground floor. When the doors opened, two people were waiting to enter. Geoff and I nonchalantly walked out, as if vending machines in elevators were a common occurrence. When it came back down, we dragged the machine over to my car, opened the rear hatch, pushed it in as far as it would go, and drove to my house, hoping to not get pulled over.

The motivation for this theft wasn't the money in the machine or bragging rights. The reason was to adorn...

My Bedroom

I wanted a bedroom that matched my personality: unique, twisted, and the product of intoxicated thinking. The décor started with a 4-foot-tall Canadian Club bottle with a push dispenser, which my parents gave me after they returned from a cruise. The bottle was half full when I got it, much to Geoff's delight. One wall of my room was covered with beer can wallpaper, which my parents picked out.

I started adding to the ambiance. I took a yield sign from the side of the road and mounted it on my wall. My neighborhood had a "neighborhood watch" sign at the front entrance. To test its effectiveness, I stole it. The "neighborhood watch" didn't see me do it. I mounted it on my wall.

I stole an actual traffic light, which was a challenge. I mounted it in the corner of my room. I had various "Do Not Enter," "Employees Only," and "Danger! High Voltage!" signs hanging everywhere, along with a picture of Mel Tillis eating breakfast, which I stole from a Whataburger drive-thru.

I now had a vending machine. When Mom saw it, she responded by saying what she always said when something new appeared in my room, "I don't want to know where you got it."

Although she was tolerant of my ever-expanding décor, I eventually discovered her limit. Geoff and I, in a stoned and drunken state, stole a small tombstone from a cemetery. The dates on the stone indicated the deceased was four years old. I placed it on the shelf in my room and passed out.

Brett Douglas

I was awakened by Mom, who said in a rather distressed manner, “I feel like I’ve been very understanding of the shit that appears in your room. But now you’ve crossed the line. GET THAT FUCKING TOMBSTONE OUT OF MY HOUSE RIGHT FUCKING NOW AND GO PUT IT BACK WHERE YOU FUCKING FOUND IT!” Which I did right fucking then.

Later, I told Geoff, “Mom wasn’t happy about the tombstone. I had to put it back.”

“Yeah, I had a feeling that wasn’t going to go over well,” he chuckled.

The Baby

Geoff and I regularly drank at Fancy Free, a local gay bar with a rather lax policy concerning underage drinking. One particular evening, I felt lonely and complained I had little chance of “getting lucky” in a gay bar. Being a good friend, Geoff found a heterosexual woman who was drunk enough to have sex with me. After kissing in my car for a while, she said, “Let’s go back to your house.”

“I’d rather go to your place.” I didn’t want to divulge the fact I lived with my parents.

“I live with my husband’s parents,” she said.

“What? Where is your husband?”

“He’s in the military. He’ll be gone for weeks.”

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After some negotiating, we went to her husband's parents' house. We entered her bedroom, but she refused to turn on the light. As we disrobed, I heard something moving.

"What's that noise?"

"Don't worry about it." We had sex and passed out.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of people eating breakfast outside her bedroom door. I looked around the room. Next to her bed was a crib holding a sleeping baby, the source of the shuffling noise I heard the night before. Sex seemed so important just a few hours ago. The room had two windows, which were narrow and located near the ceiling. I couldn't squeeze through them. I tried waking the woman, but she wouldn't stir. To make matters worse, the baby was starting to awaken. I had no choice. I got dressed and, with my shoes in my hand and an "I just had sex" hairdo, walked out of the room.

I was faced with her husband's family sitting at the dining room table. They all glared at me, so I said the only thing I could think of. "Hi."

The older man, who I assumed was her husband's father, sprang from his chair. I bolted toward the only door I could see, hoping it wasn't a closet. I ran outside and drove off.

I thanked Geoff later.

Over the years, Geoff tried to stay in touch with me, but I was a little preoccupied. A true friend, someone who loves you despite your faults, is hard

to find and harder to keep. I truly regret losing contact with Geoff, who did everything he could to be a friend, and whose friendship I didn't deserve.

Chris

As animated as Geoff was, Chris was just the opposite. He spoke in a monotone voice and had a sarcastic, cynical sense of humor. Plus, he was a ginger, which meant he had no soul, a fact I envied.

Chris and I created the worst band in the history of music, *Vomit*. Neither of us had any musical talent; we couldn't sing or play instruments, and our equipment was ridiculously inadequate. But the 80's was the era of garage punk, so we didn't let a few deficiencies stop us.

A recording session always started with getting stoned. Next, we both grabbed a piece of paper and wrote some lyrics. Finally, Chris pressed the record button, and we taped each song in one take.

We tried to make the songs as offensive as possible. *Nature Sucks*, *Crippled Fucking Freaks*, *Kill Ted Turner*, *Knife the Pope*, *Con Man Christ*, *Theme Song to the Special Olympics* and *Wayne Fucked his Doggy* were just a few of the musical delights we created. My favorite song, however, was one Chris wrote, called...

Charities Suck

by
Vomit

I ain't here to share
I ain't here to give
I ain't here to be nice
I ain't here to do shit
Charities can kiss my ass
I ain't crippled. They won't help me.
Charities can lick my balls.
They ain't gettin' my money.

Why we didn't get any radio play is beyond me. Chris and I made tapes to sell and hung posters in the halls of our school, which featured a guy vomiting chunks into a bag and had a list of some of our song titles. One of the songs was called *Conflicting Races is Natural*, which our black principal, Mr. Sherman, had an issue with. We were summoned to the principal's office. "Are you trying to start a race war at this school?" he asked.

"No. We just want to sell tapes," Chris responded in his monotone voice.

"Well, you can't put up posters telling students that it's natural for different races to fight."

"I guess I can see your point," Chris flatly stated. I was biting my lip, trying not to laugh.

"Now, go take down those posters. Anything posted from now on has to be approved first." The sudden disappearance of our advertising added to the band's mystique. We sold five tapes.

Other than our successful band and affinity for pot, Chris and I had something else in common:

Atheism

When I was twelve years old, I was invited to eat dinner with my friend Shannon. During the visit, his mother said something I had never heard before. “We all know we didn’t evolve from monkeys. The Bible says man was created in God’s image.”

Having just finished a book about Charles Darwin as well as one on prehistoric man, I thought she was simply misinformed. “We didn’t evolve from monkeys. We evolved from less advanced humans.”

“That’s not true. Nowhere in the Bible does it say anything about humans existing before Adam and Eve.”

“But all animals evolve.”

“Humans are not animals.”

“Of course, we’re animals. If not, then what are we?”

“Animals have no concept of God.”

“Look. Let me run home and get the books I just read. I’ll show you what I’m talking about.” I hopped on my bike and rode home.

When I ran back to my room, Mom asked, “What are you looking for?”

“Shannon’s parents don’t believe in evolution. I’m looking for my books so I can show them they’re wrong.”

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“Okay, Brett. We need to talk.” Mom explained I wasn’t going to convince them they were wrong because I was challenging their religious beliefs, which were deeply held and personal; I risked upsetting them if I continued discussing this topic. She told me to go back to Shannon’s house, tell his parents I couldn’t find the books, and never bring it up again. I did as I was told. Her advice saved my friendship with Shannon.

The incident fascinated me. How could anyone disregard scientific evidence and the opinion of the most intelligent people on the planet and simply believe something on faith? If man was created in God’s image, how could man create the universe? And if God existed, why can’t we see Him, or hear Him, or have any concrete proof of His existence? Science and religion appeared to be mutually exclusive. So, I had to make a choice; I chose science. At a young age, I realized I was an atheist.

Of course, having a personal belief of disbelief wasn’t enough. As with most things in my life, I had to take it to the extreme. I became a militant atheist, which meant my self-anointed purpose in life was not only to convince believers how wrong they were, I also had an obligation to offend them in the most obnoxious way possible.

For example, a group of street preachers handed out religious pamphlets in front of Seville Quarter, the largest nightclub in Pensacola. Every time I was given one, I said, “No thanks. I have front row seats in Hell.” I then took the pamphlet, wiped my ass with it, and threw it back at them.

Chris shared my utter disdain for anything religious. We cut the center out of a Bible and stashed our pot in it. Whenever we wanted to get stoned, one of us would say, "It's time for Bible study."

After getting drunk with Chris one evening, I passed out on my parents' couch. The next morning, Robert woke me and asked, "Why is there a Baby Jesus in your car?"

Sure enough, a plastic Baby Jesus was in my passenger seat. I couldn't remember where it came from and assumed Chris had put it there as a joke. When I called him, he said, "You don't remember last night?"

"No."

"You were too drunk to drive, so as I'm taking you home, you had me stop at every Nativity scene we passed so you could destroy it. You stole the Baby Jesus from the last one." Of course, it was proudly displayed in my bedroom.

One Saturday night, Chris and I noticed the First Assembly of God Church had installed a new marquee sign. We drove around stealing letters from other signs until we had the ones we needed, removed the letters from the church marquee, and spelled out a pleasant message for the Sunday morning churchgoers.

FUCK JESUS

Don't worry. I'm not going to burn in Hell because it doesn't exist. At least, that's what I hope.

I heard some people at school talking about a band called *The Dead Kennedys*. Thinking the name was funny, I asked Mom for one of their albums

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for Christmas. After listening to it, my Barry Manilow stage ended. I was a punk rock fan from that day forward. I had never heard music so provocative and cynical as well as eloquently presented lyrically. The band didn't care much for religion, as demonstrated by this song.

Religious Vomit

by
The Dead Kennedys

All religions make me want to throw up
All religions make me sick
All religions make me want to throw up
All religions suck

They all claim that they have the truth
They'll set you free
Just give them all your money and
They'll set you free
Free for fee

They claim that they have the answer
When they don't even know the question
They're just a bunch of liars
They just want your money
They just want your consciousness

All religions make me want to throw up
All religions make me sick
All religions make me want to throw up
All religions suck

All religions suck
All religions make me want to throw up
All religions suck
All religions make me wanna bleah

I admit that song wasn't one of their more eloquent ones, but you get the idea.

Whataburger

Chris and I got jobs at Whataburger. The manager, Jackie, was a black woman with bulbous fingertips, which gave her hands a strange, alien look. She spent a lot of time in the rear of the building talking to her friends, a situation we took full advantage of. We had our dealer deliver weed to the store, paying him with money taken straight from the register, and even took turns getting high in the bathroom. Eventually, Jackie started watching the drawers closely, so we created a new system. Chris worked the grill, and I worked the drive-thru window. I developed a method of signaling him as to what food to prepare without ringing it up. At the end of our shift, we took the excess money from the drawer and purchased weed with it. Jackie must have smelled a rat because she moved both of us to the grill. From that point forward, we had to purchase weed with our own money.

One particularly busy lunch rush, Chris smashed a fly with the spatula and put it on a hamburger. We giggled as we watched a police officer eat it. A competition was now in place. We laughed as I spit a big, green loogie on a hamburger. Not to be outdone, Chris wrung out a dirty cleaning rag on one. I knew I could beat that, so I took the top and bottom buns of an order and sopped up the dirty, gray water off the floor. The entire time, we were howling with laughter.

This next one is rather obvious.

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically

Whataburger would eventually change the course of my life in a drastic way.

Adrianne

I met Adrianne in Home Economics class. She was tall, slim and muscular, a result of being on the Washington High School swim team. I learned the only thing I liked better than large breasts were small ones. She had a deeper voice than most females, long sandy-blond hair, puffy cheeks, and a beautiful, perfectly proportioned face.

Although Adrianne ran in a social circle outside of my own, she seemed to like me. After a few weeks of flirting, she told me to come to her bedroom window at midnight, a request I was happy to fulfill. Once there, I reenacted everything I had witnessed in all those John Holmes' movies I had watched years earlier. Afterward, she said, "I knew you would be a good lover." Thus began our torrid love affair.

Like most relationships, the beginning was incredible. Adrianne was a sexual dynamo and a lot of fun to be around. She wasn't mischievous like Cheryl but was always looking for a party.

Adrianne loved to get drunk but vehemently opposed drug use. I made several attempts to lessen her opposition to marijuana, but she wouldn't budge. I was falling hard for her, so I did what any blossoming drug addict would do to demonstrate his devotion. I lied.

Since I couldn't get high with her, I drank alcohol when we were together and smoked weed when we weren't. Chris and I were recording music at the time, and getting stoned was an essential part of the process. Eventually, Adrianne wanted me to stop associating with him, a demand I refused to comply

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with. Instead of leveling with her, I lied about my whereabouts, a habit I kept for many years.

I don't like to drink alcohol because it doesn't bring out my best qualities. I tend to get emotional or angry. I also hate hangovers. But Adrienne wasn't interested in spending time with my stoner friends. So, I attempted to fit in with her crowd, although I found them difficult to relate to. I'm not a typical, testosterone-ridden, alpha male. I prefer relationships over one-night stands. I prefer intelligent conversation over "my dick's bigger than yours" bravado. To be honest, sex stresses me out. This pressure is similar to what a Broadway performer feels; every night must be award-winning. I must be comfortable with the person I'm with, in an environment I'm comfortable in (usually), or my toy soldier will not salute. Most men will fuck a hornet's nest if you spray perfume on it.

Another challenge with dating Adrienne was her uncle, Dean Carl. He was the biggest, meanest dean at Washington High School, the same one I tormented with my bathroom pot smoking. Every time she skipped school, I got called to his office. My less-than-stellar reputation didn't help. During one of these interrogations, I wore a black blazer covered with buttons, most of which were of bands I liked. Dean Carl pulled one off my jacket and said, "You can't wear sexually explicit buttons."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you think a 'sex pistol' is?"

I laughed. The meaning of the band's name had never occurred to me.

“What else do you have on you?” he asked as he started rummaging through my pockets. He pulled out a plastic eyeball and a rubber frog; I can’t remember why I had those things. I thought I was home free until he removed a condom from my pocket, a possession I would have normally been admired for having.

“And what’s this for?” Dean Carl glared at me.

“Uh...in case I ever have sex.” I don’t think he bought my answer. Thank God I left my weed in the car.

During my high school years, Dean Carl was around every corner. I couldn’t shake this guy, especially when Adrianne and I were together. One Thanksgiving, I ate dinner with her family and was appalled to see him sitting at the table. He was like a bad case of herpes, popping up at the worst time. After dinner, I dragged Adrianne into the bathroom and had sex with her, just 15 feet from him. he he he...

As stated earlier, all good things go bad eventually. Our excessive drinking started to cause problems. Drama and fighting became a regular occurrence. I tried to be the person she wanted, but the pretense was making me unhappy. The more strenuous my efforts to fit in with her crowd, the more I felt like an outsider, which was exacerbated by the alcohol. My relationship with Cheryl was devoid of discord. I expected all relationships to be that smooth. Now, dissonance was the norm, and our love affair had become a soap opera. We no longer enjoyed each other’s company; we were simply accustomed to one another. This disconnect wasn’t always her fault. Actually, it seldom was.

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Adrianne, some of her friends and I went to Pensacola Beach after Hurricane Elena to look at the damage. The hotels were gutted by the storm surge and fenced off to prevent people from going inside. Regardless, we managed to sneak into one of them and look around. As we were leaving, I ignited one of the many piles of mattresses with a lighter. No one saw me do it. We left the hotel, drove to the end of the beach, turned around and drove back. When we passed the building again, the entire structure was in flames. Adrianne was furious. "What the hell did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit. I can't believe you. What the fuck were you thinking?"

Geoff, Cheryl, and Chris would have thought my actions were funny. Adrianne and her friends were mortified. They immediately took me home.

Without warning, Adrianne fell silent. No calls. No visits. She would have nothing to do with me. A few weeks later, I saw her at a party in the arms of another man. I left, sick to my stomach.

Two days later, I saw her car parked at an unfamiliar house. I stopped and knocked on the door. When it opened, I was standing face to face with the man I saw Adrianne with at the party. Before I could speak, she came walking down the stairs in her panties and his shirt. Without saying a word, I turned and walked to my car, tears welling up. I drove home and had a long, loud, tearful cry. That level of pain was new to me. When no more tears came forth, I had to face reality. Adrianne and I were through.

Chris was happy about our split. He made me realize, in his deadpan manner, I had been chasing Adrianne around like a puppy, desperately pining

for her acceptance and affection. I wasn't her type and had unsuccessfully attempted to be someone I wasn't. Opposites don't always attract.

I felt rudderless. I hadn't been single in years, and the adjustment was rough. But at least I could openly smoke weed and quickly made up for lost time.

Near our neighborhood is an area called "The Bluffs," which is a cliff overlooking Pensacola Bay. It has two boardwalks, about fifty yards apart, both leading to the water below. Each has a parking lot in front, which was a popular hangout for teenagers. One evening, Chris, Burgess, and I pulled up to the larger of the two boardwalks, where a sizable crowd had gathered. I saw Adrianne sitting on the tailgate of a truck with her new boyfriend. "Let's go down to the other one," Chris said.

The three of us walked down the steps of the second boardwalk, although I was the only one with a purpose. I got to the bottom and looked out over the beach, recalling a night when Adrianne and I made love to the quiet sound of the lapping waves. I looked down the beach and saw the end of the first boardwalk. "FUCK YOU, WHORE!" I futilely yelled at the night.

I noticed Chris and Burgess were gone. I didn't know how long I'd been standing there and suddenly wanted to get away from this place. I ran up the long boardwalk, trying to put the beach and Adrianne behind me. If only life were that simple.

I was half way up when I saw her sitting on the steps. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you."

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“Why?”

“Can we talk?”

“What is there to say? Where’s your boyfriend?”

“He’s gone.”

“What do you mean ‘He’s gone?’”

“I told him to leave. He was using me for sex.”

“And it took two months to figure that out?”

Adrienne stood and faced me, tears streaking her face. “I’m sorry. I made a terrible mistake. I miss you so much.”

We spent the evening discussing our relationship. I told her about the lesson I learned from our separation, a belief I hold to this day. I call it...

The Relationship Paradigm

In every romantic relationship, one person will need it more than the other. This need is not the same as love. One person will be needier, clingier, more possessive and insecure than the other.

This is because of the...

One Up/One Down Axiom

- The person who needs the relationship more is ONE DOWN and is always at a disadvantage. This person is easily manipulated and will change themselves to accommodate the other.
- The person who needs the relationship less is ONE UP and always has the advantage. This person makes most of the decisions and enjoys the luxury of being themselves.

These roles are not consciously pursued and can toggle back and forth, but generally, one person is mostly *up*, and the other is mostly *down*. Love is a chess game with each player trying to gain the emotional advantage.

I didn't realize how "one down" I was with Adrianne until we separated and I had time to think about my behavior. I told her I would no longer make any concessions to her. Love the person I am or forget it.

Which leads us to....

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake

This song sums it up quite nicely.

Stories of Old

by
Depeche Mode

Take a look at unselected cases
You will find love has been wrecked
By both sides compromising
Amounting to a disastrous effect
You hear stories of old
Of princes bold
With riches untold
Happy souls

Casting it all aside
To take some bride
To have the girl of their dreams

At their side
But not me
I can't do that
Not me
I'm not like that
I couldn't sacrifice
Anything at all to love

I really like you
I'm attracted to you
The way you move
The things you do
I'll probably burn in Hell
For saying this
But I'm really in Heaven
Whenever we kiss

But Oh no!
You won't change me
You can try
For an eternity
I wouldn't sacrifice
Anything at all to love

Now I've got things to do
You have too
And I've got to be me
You've got to be you
So take my hand
And feel these lips
And let's savor a kiss
Like we'd savor a sip
Of vintage wine
One more time
Let's surrender
To this love divine

And we won't sacrifice
Anything at all to love

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Soon after, Adrienne and I separated for good. I swore I would never be “one down” in a relationship again, no matter how much pain I felt or how long I would be alone. After our romance ended, five years would pass before I dated again. But only six months went by before I met the love of my life.

Dana

Six months after Adrienne’s departure, Chris and I were working at Whataburger when we were introduced to a new employee. Dana was short and frail, with shoulder-length, light brown hair, and dull brown eyes. Although she was older than us, Chris was smitten with her. I, on the other hand, was not interested.

Chris eventually convinced her to go out with him. For some reason, Gary, a stoner friend, and I were invited. I brought the weed, and she provided the alcohol. We were having a good time when she asked Chris to take her to a friend’s house. The four of us ended up on the ABC streets, a bad section of town where all the street names were a single letter (A Street, B Street, etc.). We pulled up to a particularly shady house, and she quickly disappeared inside.

“What the fuck are we doing here?” I nervously asked.

“I don’t know,” Chris flatly responded.

“Man, fuck this cunt noise,” Gary replied with a phrase he frequently used.

“Well, I’m not leaving her here!” Chris barked with an unusual level of emotion.

Dana finally returned. “Now drive to the 7-11 and park on the side,” she excitedly said. Chris obliged. Once parked, she pulled a pouch from her purse and produced a small bag of yellow powder. “Who wants to get high?” she asked with a Cheshire cat grin.

“What’s that?” Chris asked.

“Cocaine,” Dana said as she produced four hypodermic needles.

Upon seeing them, Chris and Gary emphatically declined. I, on the other hand, stuck my arm out without hesitating. “I’ll do it,” I answered like a starving man responding to food.

Dana melted the cocaine in a spoon and gave herself a shot, then turned to me. I had done coke once before but knew this experience would be different. The anticipation I felt while waiting for her to prepare my shot was a high in itself. I started feeling anxious. A knot developed in the pit of my stomach, and time seemed to slow down. Her turn went quickly, but mine seemed to be taking forever.

“You ready?” Dana finally asked.

“Yes,” I panted. I had been ready for this my entire life.

Dana rolled up my sleeve, tied a belt around my upper arm, and studied it at the fold. After a moment, I felt a sting. I patiently waited for the change in consciousness I knew would be coming. A couple of seconds went by, and nothing felt different. Suddenly, an intense warmth ran throughout my body.

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“Uh!” I gasped as I braced myself with my other arm. The air was sucked from my lungs. The numbing taste of cocaine flooded my mouth, but I could tell it was coming from the inside of my tongue. A euphoria racked my body, unlike anything I had ever felt. I sat back in my seat, closed my eyes, and relished my first, sweet encounter with the love of my life. (I tricked you. You thought I was talking about Dana.)

I don't remember how we spent the rest of that evening. Nothing could compare to the experience I just had. At the time, this moment seemed like just another fun night that soon would become a pleasant memory. But the door I walked through operates like a heart valve. Once I passed through it, I could never go back.

Now, I realize...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event

Eventually, Chris dated Dana, but she broke his heart. Drug addicts do that.

Monique

I moved out of my parents' house and, along with Geoff, moved into an apartment with our friend Sissy, who was the only movie star I ever met. She starred in *Jaws 2*, which was filmed on Pensacola Beach. In the movie, after Sherriff Brody scares the vacationers on the beach, she is on the screen for two seconds giving him a dirty look.

Geoffrey introduced me to Monique, Andrea, and Anna. We smoked weed and took acid constantly. When I had enough money, I would also shoot cocaine, but never with my friends. Memaw was diabetic. Thus she unknowingly supplied me with fresh needles. No one knew of my bad habit. Yet.

One afternoon while my parents were at work, I went to their house to get something to eat and, being sleep deprived, fell asleep on the couch. Mom came home early and saw the track marks on my arm. After being confronted with my obvious drug use, I told her I did it once at a party, didn't like it, and would never do it again. In other words, I lied. Deceit is an important apparatus in a drug addict's tool box. Perhaps the most important.

Our apartment became party central. Eventually, eight people lived with us, along with a constant stream of party-goers. We were regularly harassed by the landlord over the noise. More than once, I came home to a house full of people. "Is Geoff, Chris, Anna, Monique, Andrea, Mike, Shelly, or Tyson here?" I asked the crowd.

Brett Douglas

“Haven’t seen ‘em,” was the reply I got. Life was drug-filled and chaotic, but, much like the chaos at Richie’s house, I enjoyed the insane commotion.

Although I was a junkie, I didn’t look the part. I worked at K-Mart and wore slacks, dress shoes, and a shirt and tie, all requirements for my job. My innocent appearance earned me the nickname “Brettles,” from my female co-workers, a name I despised. Despite my legitimate demeanor, drugs seemed to find me even when I wasn’t looking.

I befriended a salesman named Brian, who looked exactly like the Brawny guy on the paper towel label. Despite our long conversations, I never disclosed my drug habit to him. One advantage of working at K-Mart was they paid their employees in cash. I was leaving work one Friday night when Brian asked if I wanted to go to a party that was being thrown by another K-Mart employee, Jesse, the security manager. He was an older, heavy-set man who didn’t seem to have a sense of humor unless he was busting a shoplifter. I wasn’t sure how fun a party thrown by Jesse would be, but, with nothing better to do, I agreed to go.

Four people were at the party: Jesse, his girlfriend, Brian, and myself. *Not much of a party.*

“You cool?” Jesse asked.

“Of course,” I answered. I had no idea what he was talking about. I just knew it was never cool to admit to not being cool.

Jesse reached into a cabinet and produced a plate holding a pile of cocaine and some needles. Does everyone encounter multiple opportunities to

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do intravenous drugs, or is it just me? Realizing this party might be fun, I threw some money on the table, and we shot dope all night.

Afterward, I asked Brian how he knew I would be willing to shoot up.

“I didn’t.”

At the time, I thought the drug gods were watching out for me. I had no idea they were actually plotting my demise.

After I quit K-Mart, I relaxed and enjoyed my unemployment for a couple of weeks. Geoffrey, Anna, Andrea and I would trip on acid while I explained quantum mechanics or argued against the existence of God. Monique, however, was afraid to do the drug. I decided my personal goal was to change that. She was tall with a solid body and long, light blonde hair. But her most endearing quality was her laugh, which was loud, animated and as distinctive as a fingerprint. Our group was inseparable, and I spent most of my time trying to be funny just so I could hear her laugh. I even started to fall in love but was too shy to tell her how I felt.

The day finally arrived when I convinced Monique to take acid. Our neighbors in the adjacent apartment were watching some important sporting event on television, and their place was full of people. Moe and I were alone in our apartment. “Just put this under your tongue.”

Monique smiled. “I don’t know. I’m scared.”

“Moe, I’m doing this with you.”

She chuckled one of her amazing laughs. “I know. That’s what scares me.”

“You know I would never let anything happen to you.”

Brett Douglas

“You’re gonna’ freak me out with all that crazy shit you talk about.”

“Okay, no physics or God talk. I promise. We can talk about whatever you want”.

“Okay. I’ll do it.” She was still smiling. “You better not fuck with me.”

“I swear, I won’t.”

“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not. We will do this together.” With that promise, Monique took acid for the first time.

For those of you who have never taken acid, let’s take a break from the story to discuss...

What Acid is Like

Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), or acid, as it is commonly known, is a hallucinogenic drug created by Albert Hofmann in 1938. It was brought into the modern culture by Timothy Leary in the 1960's. Typically, the substance is applied to a small piece of paper, called a hit, which is placed under the tongue.

The following chart explains what experience can be expected while on acid after unexpectedly being shown a picture of Angela Lansbury's face.

Amount	Effect
¼ hit	Immediately upon seeing her face, you will burst into the hardest, most gut-wrenching laughter you have ever experienced. You will continue laughing for hours for no apparent reason. Soon, any object, such as a coat hanger or litterbox, will cause an equal amount of laughter.
½ hit	You will still laugh uncontrollably, but the laughing fits will stop occasionally. You will notice Angela Lansbury's face is distorting, and her skin appears to be breathing. You will realize her hair is actually a small animal and be unable to discern which end is the head and which is the tail. You will notice her mouth is moving and, for the first time in your life, you can read lips. She will seem to be telling you she lost her pancreas and wants you to go outside and look for it. You may or may not go. Suddenly, you will start laughing again.
1 hit	You will doubt you exist. You will clearly see the absurdity of things which seemed important an hour ago. Angela Lansbury is no longer in the picture but instead, is sitting next to you. Over the next five hours, she explains the meaning of life in Latin, which you completely understand. Your mind will expand to a degree you never knew was possible. In reality, you have been making fart noises for the last fifteen minutes.

As fun as acid sounds, the risk of a “bad trip” is always a possibility. I discovered this fact after my first date with Dru, a Goth chick I met at one of the many parties which spontaneously occurred at our apartment. I finally met someone who liked the same music as I and held my cynical outlook on life. I really liked Dru but made the mistake of inviting her to take acid with Chris and me. She had never taken the drug before but had no reservations about trying it. For some reason, Chris wanted to spend the evening with a redneck couple he just met. The five of us all took one hit a piece and waited for the fun to begin.

Chris, Dru and I sat in the redneck couple’s living room, watching their small parrot walk across the floor like a wind-up toy. Chris was slamming beers faster than normal, so by the time the acid started to take effect, he was incoherent. Dru and I, dressed in black, were left to interact with the redneck couple while we were tripping. Since we had nothing in common, the four of us sat in an uncomfortable silence. Dru went to the kitchen to grab a beer. Chris unexpectedly woke up and followed her. Suddenly, I heard her screaming. I ran to her aid and saw Chris trying to rip her clothes off. He was staggeringly drunk.

“Get him off me! Get him off me!” Dru cried, mascara running down her face. I threw him to the ground and attempted to console her. “I don’t like this shit. I don’t feel right. I want to go home.”

I walked her to the car, only to discover a torrential rain had started. Sitting in the driver’s seat, I remembered the car had no windshield wipers. Normally, driving in a storm without the aid of wipers wasn’t a problem, but the

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rain was falling exceptionally hard, and, not to mention, I was tripping balls. “There’s no way I can drive like this,” I told Dru as I stared at the sheets of rain hitting the windshield.

“How long does this shit last?”

“Uh...about eight hours.”

“What?! Oh, my God!”

With no other options, we decided to go back inside and wait for the rain to subside. As soon as we walked through the door, Chris grabbed her and started pulling at her clothes. The male redneck punched him in the face. As Chris lay motionless on the floor, the rest of us sat in silence, listening to the rain and Dru’s sobs as we watched the little parrot walk across the floor.

After that evening, I never heard from her again. At least I gave her an unforgettable date.

Anyway, back to the story...

Moe and I each took one hit. We could hear the commotion at the neighbor’s apartment, and I wanted to see what was going on. Moe protested, “I’m tripping, Brett. I can’t be around people.”

“But I’ll be with you.”

“No. I don’t want them looking at me.”

“Monique. Just follow me. We’ll sneak in and stand in the back. They’re all watching some sports bullshit anyway. No one will notice us.”

“Okay, Brett. Don’t you dare leave me.”

Brett Douglas

“I got your back.” I wonder how many times those were the last words someone ever heard.

We walked to the adjacent apartment. I cracked the door and looked inside. It was full of people who were all fixated on the television. Occasionally, everyone in the room would cheer, indicating the game they were watching was of some considerable consequence. The television was positioned in an illuminated entertainment center, which gave the room a pleasant ambiance. I visually tracked our path to the back, then turned to Moe. She looked terrified. I placed my extended index finger over my lips and whispered, “Shhhhhh. Follow me.”

I quietly slithered along the wall to the back of the room. As the crowd cheered at the game, I noticed Moe had not entered yet. Once I made my way to the back, I motioned with my hand for her to come to me. Our acid experience was peaking.

Moe quietly entered the room and closed the door. She started moving along the wall, pressing against it in a desperate attempt to render herself invisible. Her shoulder touched the light switches, one of which controlled the power to the entire entertainment system. Suddenly, the television lost power, causing everyone in the room to look at Monique and scream, “HEY!”

Monique fled the room as if it were on fire. I had never seen her move that fast. I ran after her, laughing hysterically. When I finally caught up with her, she was shaking. “You motherfucker! You did that on purpose.” Moe yelled, terror distorting her face.

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"I didn't do that. You did," I laughed. We spent the rest of the evening alone in our apartment.

Andrea

Although I never formally dated Monique, I did date Andrea. She was short with wavy, sandy-blond hair, a uniquely 80's sense of style and an equally unique European beauty. Andrea was more grounded than the rest of us, but for some crazy reason, she was interested in me.

Andrea loved to get high and explore places we had no business investigating. Next to the Pensacola Civic Center is St. Michael's Cemetery, which dates to the Civil War. We got stoned and decided to walk through it at midnight. As we perused the tombstones, I noticed a mausoleum with an open door. Naturally, we investigated. Crypts lined both walls, and two stone slabs rested on the ground, marking two additional tombs. I recalled a scene from one of my favorite movies, *The Omen*, where someone pushed the granite slab off a tomb and found a skeleton. One of the slabs had been pushed aside slightly, so I suggested we try to open it further. With some considerable effort, we managed to increase the opening by a few inches, enough to put a lighter down in the gap to see what was inside. We knelt, lit the lighter, and slowly drew closer.

Suddenly, something leapt from the opening, just inches from our faces. I almost shit my pants. We fled the graveyard screaming. As we sat in

her car shaking and panting, we tried to process what the fuck just happened. A black cat had climbed into the opening and jumped out when we stuck the lighter inside.

Andrea was a lot of fun, and I loved spending time with her. But I tend to destroy relationships I cherish. One evening, I got drunk and said some rather harsh things to her. We didn't date long.

Applebee's

After my two-week unemployed vacation, I got a job at an Applebee's restaurant. I erroneously thought I had to be of drinking age to serve alcohol, so I lied about my date of birth on the application. Keith, the manager, told me to wear khaki pants. Although I agreed to do so, I had no idea what a "khaki" was. Mom later told me they were light tan dress pants. I had no money, but I did have a tan pair of polyester pants which were a size too small. I had never waited tables before and struggled to keep up with the pace. I was unaware of my new coworkers laughing behind my back at my ridiculous pants.

I've always used humor to ingratiate myself with new people. Two hardware-store bull-dykes were having lunch when I approached a fellow employee, Lisa, and said, "Boy, those women are sexy."

"I know. They make me want to turn gay," she replied.

"Yeah, me too,"

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She laughed. I was now a member of the in-crowd. Lisa and her friend, Sherri, were the hottest, most popular employees at Applebee's. They took me to the mall and bought me some khaki pants.

I soon became friends with Keith. He asked if I would like to go out after work, and I, with nothing better to do, agreed. We left Applebee's and stopped by his house so he could change clothes. As I waited, Keith asked, "Can you hook up my VCR? I can never figure it out."

I set up the machine and inserted a VHS tape. As I pressed the play button, Keith ran into the room. "No. No. Don't use that one!" Too late. I was faced with two men having sex on the television screen. I looked at Keith.

"I'm gay," he said.

"Well, I'm straight, but most of my friends are gay."

I don't seek out gay friends; they find *me*. Suddenly, all the gay people at Applebee's, about half of the staff, were now my friends, but Keith, Lisa, Sherri and I were tight. I loved my job and the people I worked with. A year would pass before a new hostess was hired, a person I would regularly see for a long time to come.

Paula

Throughout every person's life, we encounter tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people, most of which are average and of no mental consequence whatsoever. They are forgotten just as quickly as they are acknowledged. But occasionally, we see a person who is so elegantly beautiful, so tastefully unique, we look at them for just a second longer, and sometimes, remember them for years after.

Paula is one of those special people. She had long brown hair with tight curls, huge brown eyes, round, puffy cheeks, a "toothpaste commercial" smile with too many teeth, and flawless skin. Her beauty was a classic type, with perfectly proportioned features arranged on an unblemished canvas of silk. She had exceptionally large, bouncy breasts and a sexy awkwardness in her walk. Every time she walked by, I took an extra second to gawk at her. Of course, she didn't notice me. A goddess like her could have any man she wanted. I wouldn't be in the running. Anyway, I had other interests.

Cocaine and I had parted ways, but unlike my human romances, this love kept returning. One busy dinner service, Keith approached me. "Brett, can I see you in the office?"

I nervously followed him to the back of the restaurant, unsure as to what would justify his stern tone. Much to my surprise, two lines of cocaine were lying on his desk.

"Shit, man! You sounded serious," I laughed.

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“Hurry before someone comes back here.” We snorted one line each. Keeping up with the dinner rush was no longer a problem. What a persistent lover cocaine turned out to be. Keith became my new source of the drug.

Within a week, I started shooting cocaine again. Waiting tables puts cash in your pocket after every shift, which made daily injections possible. I even did it while I was working. The shirts Applebee’s required us to wear had short sleeves. Since my ability to cleanly hit a vein was not as developed as it would eventually become, I exposed bloody track marks to my customers whenever I reached across a table to grab a plate or refill a drink. That fact, however, didn’t stop me.

Keith noticed my appetite for cocaine exceeded his own and eventually commented on it. But I did my job and was punctual, not to mention he was selling the drug to me, so his protests were ineffectual.

Sherri, on the other hand, had no such constraints. She was the first person in our group to piece together the clues to my secret. Her boyfriend, Duke, was Keith’s source of cocaine. Thus, Sherri was aware of the amounts I was purchasing. While my friends would buy it for the weekend, I usually purchased some twice a day. Sherri noticed the change in my demeanor when I did coke, which was even more apparent when I wasn’t high on it. The least subtle clue, however, was the swollen and bruised whelps in the fold of my arm. Sherri pulled me into the back of the restaurant and turned my left arm over, exposing fresh track marks. “What the fuck is this?”

“I cut myself shaving.”

Brett Douglas

“This is not funny.” Sherri forced my eyes to meet hers. “I love you, baby. But if I see this again, you’ll be cut off.”

“I only tried it once. It won’t happen again.” I had told that lie before.

Sherri hugged me. “Please baby. Not again. You promise?”

“I promise.” Deception was becoming a habit, a prerequisite for survival. Promises were no longer an agreement of trust but meaningless words to keep the truth in its entirety from being revealed.

My first interaction with Paula was more of an impulse. As she walked by carrying a tray of empty dishes, I stuck my foot out and tripped her. Her fall caused laughter and applause from the patrons at the bar. She smiled and took the incident in good spirits, although I was concerned I had upset her. I soon discovered my fears were unfounded.

Several days later, Paula and some friends were eating dinner in my section, which was a row of booths with a narrow exit consisting of three small steps which lead to the main floor. As I whizzed by her table carrying a stack of dishes, Paula stuck *her* foot out, causing me to fall down the steps and land flat on my face. I looked at her and quoted Bugs Bunny. “Of course you know, this means war.” Paula just smiled. The battle had begun, and I was certain I would prevail.

Each waiter at Applebee’s kept a Styrofoam cup on a shelf above the soda dispensers. To differentiate drinks, each waiter would write their name on the cup. After a few days, I poured salt in Paula’s soda. By pure luck, I got to witness her drink it. She knew I was the culprit but never said a word about it.

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The next day, I drank my iced tea with Tabasco sauce. This exchange went back and forth for a while, but she got the last laugh.

Paula introduced me to her friend, Cassie, who was visiting from Great Britain. She was slightly thicker and shorter than Paula, with dark blonde hair and average looks. Her British accent made up for any physical deficiencies. The three of us went to a party, and, while Paula mingled, I talked to Cassie, asking her about life in England, Monty Python, the Royal Family, and her opinion of America. She was happy to answer my questions and seemed to like me. At the end of the evening, I asked to see her again, but she said she would have to go back to England soon.

The next time I saw Paula, I asked about Cassie. Her response let me know I wasn't dealing with an amateur.

"Cassie went to high school with me," Paula explained, a devious grin adorning her face. "She has never been to England. She doesn't even have a British accent."

I must admit, her response caught me completely off guard. I looked like a fool in front of her friends. I had been out-manuevered.

Victor Sherrod's

While Paula and I were spiking each other's drinks, Sherri and Lisa introduced me to a nightclub in Fort Walton Beach called Victor Sherrod's, which was a 45-minute drive from Pensacola. The club was large with an expansive dance floor on the lowest level surrounded by an equally large area with tables and chairs. In front of the dance floor was a bar, and behind it was the DJ booth. Past the bar was a series of steps which ran the length of the club, leading up to another bar and some pool tables. The DJ played techno, industrial, and hip-hop, a most enjoyable mix.

Of course, what made Victor's special wasn't the layout or the music. The club was special because this is where I was introduced to a new drug, unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

Ecstasy

Ecstasy comes in pill form, and the active ingredient, MDMA, is a compound which creates an intense euphoria which lasts four to eight hours. If you've never taken it before, just imagine an orgasm which doesn't fade for several hours. Sherri gave me my first hit, and within thirty minutes, I was in love with everyone in the bar and could dance endlessly. I was hooked.

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Every Friday and Saturday night started with a trip to Victor's and a hit of ecstasy, and ended with a marathon dance session, interspersed with countless group hugs and slurred proclamations of our love for each other.

Paula was not included in our group. Lisa and Sherri were very protective of me, and they usually didn't approve of any female I demonstrated an interest in. I would rather be their friend than someone else's boyfriend. One evening as I drove a young lady to a party, the car behind us started flashing its headlights. When I pulled over, I discovered Sherri and Lisa in the car, imploring me to go to Victor's with them. I abandoned my date at a convenience store and followed them to Fort Walton Beach. Needless to say, I never heard from that young lady again.

The Sobriety Test

One afternoon, Paula asked if I would like to go out with her and her boyfriend, Paul. Although we didn't have a lot of money, Long Island Iced Teas were only \$2 at McGuire's. Upon arriving at Paula's house, she led me to her parents' bedroom, where her father kept a water jug full of change. We fished out quarters until we had enough money to get drunk. Her father had dropped a washer on the top of the change to discern if anyone had taken any money. We had to fish it out first, then carefully drop it back in its original position.

Brett Douglas

Flush with quarters, we headed to the cheap motel where her boyfriend was staying. Paul and Paula had been dating since high school, so I felt like a third wheel. She reassured me the three of us would have a good time.

At the motel, Paul jumped into the backseat behind Paula. I had not yet pulled out of the parking lot when an argument started between them. The disagreement escalated quickly. "Stop the car," Paula barked. She jumped out and pushed the seat forward. "Get out!" she snarled.

Paul belligerently exited the car. Paula sat in the passenger seat, slammed the door shut and said, "Go!" I drove off, leaving him standing on the side of the road. Her quick temper surprised me. It seemed uncharacteristic of her.

Paula and I went to McGuire's and had several Long Island Iced Teas. I had cocaine and needles with me, so I shot up in the bathroom in between drinks, a fact I didn't share with her.

After getting drunk, we decided to go dancing at Seville. During the drive, I asked Paula what her attitude was concerning marijuana.

"I don't smoke it, but I don't care if you do." Oh, be still my heart! A woman I could smoke weed around and didn't have to share. I really liked Paula, but would never be presumptuous enough to tell her of my feelings. Anyway, what would Lisa and Sherri think? I got stoned.

I drove a Plymouth Horizon with a broken passenger door handle. As I was making a left turn, Paula fell out of the car and found herself lying in the road with the seat of her pants ripped, exposing most of her ass. I wish I could

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say I slammed on the brakes, quickly exited the car, and ran to her aid. But the truth is I stopped the car and laughed while Paula helped herself off the asphalt.

“Oh, by the way,” I told her between chuckles, “that door doesn’t close all the way.”

“Thanks, asshole.”

Sensing I was losing her, I straightened up. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am. Let’s go dance.” I didn’t notice her ass was showing until after we left Seville, which would explain all the free drinks she received that night.

As I drove Paula back to her house, I saw blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror. I pulled over, and a police officer approached my window.

“Would you please get out of the car?” I complied. “Where are you going?”

“To take my date home.”

“Where does she live?”

“About two blocks away.” She lived much further, but I was drunk, stoned and tweaking on cocaine; passing a sobriety test was doubtful. The cop looked in the car at Paula, then addressed me again. “Get back in the car.” I complied.

The cop walked around to the passenger side and asked Paula to exit the vehicle. I watched her perform a field sobriety test in the rearview mirror. After several minutes, she got back in the car, and the cop approached my window again. “Go straight to your girlfriend’s house and stay there.”

“Yes, sir.” I started driving. “What the fuck just happened? Did you blow that cop?”

Brett Douglas

“No.” Paula laughed. “Since when do you give the *passenger* a sobriety test?”

“He wanted to see your ass.”

“No. Ya’ think?”

“Do I have a DUI now?”

We drove to Paula’s parents’ house, but the front door was locked. She warned me not to tangle with her mom, who looks, sounds, and acts like Judge Judy. We drove back to my parents’ house and passed out on their couch.

The next morning, Mom cooked us breakfast. After we ate, I heard the usual, “You have the nicest mom.”

Paula, with her frizzy, matted hair, running Mascara and exposed ass, extended her hand and said hello to my mom for the first time.

And Mom shook her hand and said hello to her future daughter-in-law.

And now...

An Observation

The incident with the police officer was not the first, nor would it be the last, DUI I avoided when I deserved one. I have been pulled over four times in my life while intoxicated, twice failed a sobriety test, and, for whatever reason, been released. My daughter calls me “serpent tongue,” a reference to my innate ability to bullshit my way through any situation. I purposely dressed nice and kept my car clean so not to look the part of a junkie or drunk. This “false book cover” helped hide my secrets from everyone, including law enforcement. I felt impervious to trouble as if attaching calamity to me was like applying scotch tape to an oily surface. I depended on blind luck, believing I was too intelligent and crafty to pay the price for my behavior. I would soon learn that “luck” is like a natural resource. It eventually becomes depleted.

The Jacket

After the dinner rush one evening, I discovered a jacket hanging on the back of a chair and rummaged through the pockets, finding a driver’s license, military ID, and deposit ticket. I took all three items.

The next day, I went to the drive-thru of the bank indicated on the deposit ticket and, using the driver’s license, emptied the account. I committed identity theft years before the term would become commonplace. I left with

Brett Douglas

over \$800 and immediately drove to Keith's house, spending it all on cocaine. Once I got home, I poured the ounce of coke on a mirror, marveling at my accomplishment. And the best part was I didn't have to share.

I never pondered the plight of the man from whom I stole the money or considered if he would be able to pay his bills. My only thought was my gain. I had just ventured down the Dark Corridor, a place in everyone's mind which houses those thoughts that should never be acted on, a mental dead zone which contains those ideas most people entertain briefly then discard just as fast. Everyone has thought of an audacious crime, whether it be stealing or harming someone they hate. In other words, everyone has glanced down the Dark Corridor but stopped. I didn't.

I acquired some hypodermic needles and started the most intense drug use of my life. Had I continued my previous rate of use, that pile of dope should have lasted a month. Three days later, it was gone. I learned a few things about myself from that incident.

- 1) An increase in the amount of drugs won't extend the length of time the session will last. Instead, my rate of consumption will increase.
- 2) Any action, no matter how deplorable, was acceptable if the goal was to acquire drugs.
- 3) I was becoming proficient at leading a double life. No one noticed the change in my behavior after shooting an ounce of coke in three days.
- 4) I didn't give a fuck about consequences. Why should I? I never had any.

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Sherri was very upset when she learned of my purchase, protesting to Keith, “Why did you sell him that? You know what he does with it.” I was angry with her for meddling in my affairs, confusing concern for interference.

Since the photo on the military ID was small and hard to see, I used it to get into nightclubs and purchase alcohol. I didn’t use the driver’s license because the man I lifted it from looked nothing like me. Each time, I got nervous, knowing if the ID was confiscated I would be linked to the theft. But that didn’t stop me. The allure of nightclubs overpowered any fear I had of legal entanglements. Not to mention, I never got in trouble.

My weekend itinerary varied little over the next year. I acquired cocaine on Friday morning and worked my shift. Afterward, Sherri, Lisa, Keith and I went to Victor’s and dropped ecstasy. Once every hour, I walked to my car in the parking lot and shot cocaine. After the bar had closed, we partied at Keith’s house until Saturday, then repeated the entire process. Life was grand.

Occasionally, Paula invited me to go out with her and her new boyfriend, Richard, a forgettable man who would sit and pout while we danced. He was ten years older than Paula, which indicated a relationship of convenience. I noticed she never seemed happy or engaged with him. I made a mental note.

The Termination

Feeling cocky, I sat at the Applebee's' bar one evening and had a few drinks. The next day, Julie, a coworker, and I were the last two waiters on the floor. She asked if I had any pot, which was a silly question. We ran to my car and got stoned while on the clock. As soon as I walked back in the restaurant, the general manager, Bill, asked me to come to the office. I was worried he saw us smoking weed three minutes before. Instead, he asked to see my driver's license. I immediately knew I had fucked up. Bill saw me drinking at the bar the night before and informed me I was fired.

I walked out the back door of the restaurant, trying to suppress my emotions. When I made it to my car, I bawled. The most enjoyable job I ever had or would ever have was over.

The Abortion Clinic

I felt lost. I tried to remain close to Keith, Sherri, and Lisa, but a chasm had developed between us, caused by my absence at Applebee's. I valued their friendship almost as much as drugs. Actually, the two went hand-in-hand.

I got a job at McDonald's. The vibe amongst the employees was not quite the same as it was at Applebee's. Most of my coworkers were jock-assholes or cheerleader-types and very cliquish. Besides, I've always had trouble relating to ignorant people. But one female employee did become my friend, a short, butch lesbian, named Diane. Another gay person. Imagine that.

One particularly busy lunch rush, I was instructed by a manager, in a rather rude manner, to fill the soft-serve ice cream machine. I entered the walk-in cooler, filled the container with mix, and pissed in it. Since Diane was the only employee who didn't annoy me, she was the only person I warned not to eat it. We traded evil grins every time someone ordered a dessert.

Diane introduced me to Jeanine, a new coworker who thought the ice cream incident was hilarious. The three of us started spending weekends drinking and getting stoned. Over the next year, Jeanine and I became inseparable. Our favorite topic of discussion was the sexual encounters we had with other people, much like two male friends. We were very close.

One night, Burgess and I picked up Jeanine. She suggested spending the evening with her friend, Bunny, whom I'd never met. Her apartment was located above the Pensacola Women's Center, the infamous clinic which was the location of the nation's first abortion doctor shooting. It normally had

protestors picketing in the parking lot, but since we arrived in the evening, they were absent.

The three of us went upstairs to Bunny's apartment. Cindy, who had purchased weed from me in middle school, was already there. The five of us got stoned and played a board game, called "Pass-Out." After drinking all night, Bunny drove Cindy home, with her in the passenger seat and the rest of us crammed in the back. Once she exited the car, Jeanine and I jumped from the backseat in a frantic race to claim the shotgun position. I got it first.

"Hey! Let me sit there," Jeanine protested.

"Fuck you," I jokingly responded.

"Come on, Brett. Please."

"No."

"Pretty please. You *know* how much I love you." She batted her eyes.

"Okay, God dammit." I moved to the backseat as Jeanine slid into the front.

Thirty seconds later, as we left Cindy's neighborhood, we pulled onto Spanish Trail Road and were hit by a car going 80 mph.

I have no recollection of the crash, other than the sound of helicopter blades.

My eyes opened. I was in a hospital room. Mom and Dad were solemnly sitting at the foot of the bed. I had sand in my mouth. My upper and lower teeth no longer lined up. My right thigh burned with pain. Mom approached my bed. "Brett?" she whispered.

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I looked at her.

“Do you know what happened?”

I shook my head.

“You were in a car accident. Life-Flight brought you here to the hospital.”

I stared forward, processing what I had just heard.

“Brett, look at me.”

I did.

“Your friend, Jeanine, died in the accident.”

A tear rolled down my cheek.

The Book

I spent several weeks in the hospital. The sand in my mouth was pulverized teeth. My jaw was fractured, requiring my mouth to be wired shut. My right femur was broken. To avoid a body cast, a metal rod was hammered through the center of my broken thigh bone, necessitating months of physical therapy. My therapist was a young lady who called me a “wimp” as I slowly learned to walk again. As much as I despised that woman, her demeaning method of motivation worked. I desperately tried to limp over to her so I could strangle her.

Brett Douglas

As I rested in my hospital room, I requested some non-fiction reading material. Mom went to the gift store and purchased a book titled *Narco*, a 1200-page account of the rise and fall of the three largest drug kingpins in America. I found it incredibly interesting. Sherri and Keith visited the next day and brought a splendid gift: two joints and a bag of cocaine. I hid the drugs in my drug book for three weeks until I got home.

My parents stayed by my side the entire time I was hospitalized. Once I got home, however, they wanted and deserved a night to themselves. Of course, I encouraged them to go, overriding Mom's reservations over leaving me alone in the condition I was in. As soon as I was reasonably sure they were gone, I smoked one of the joints and injected the cocaine with a used needle I had stashed in my room. The experience was similar to the first gasp of oxygen after being submerged for weeks.

The Wire Cutters

I hobbled around with a cane for months. Since my mouth was wired shut, I lived on fluids and liquefied food. I lost 50 lbs. Mom tried to find food which tasted good after being pureed. On Thanksgiving, she liquefied turkey, dressing, and gravy. Although I drank it through my bound teeth and smiled, the concoction was disgusting. She discovered the only food I could stand to eat in liquid form was pureed hot and sour soup. My parents ate Chinese food for two months for my sake. I also loved chocolate milkshakes. Who doesn't?

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Mom, concerned about my weight loss, put a dietary supplement called Ensure in my shake, but I wouldn't drink it because that shit tastes like fertilizer. She swears to this day she only did it once, but I know better.

The surgeon who repaired my jaw gave me a pair of wire cutters. I was told in case of an emergency, I could use them to open my mouth. I tossed them aside and forgot about them.

After my leg had healed, I attempted to drive my car. Upon sitting in the driver's seat for the first time in three months, I did something I had never done before. I did it instinctively as if it were a habit. Yet, this was the first time I'd ever done it.

I fastened my seatbelt.

You know what's coming...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips

Although I took safety measures while inside my car, I didn't consider my personal safety outside. The first trip in my vehicle was to Chris's house. His parents were out of town, and he was throwing a party. Today, the most popular drinking game is Beer Pong. Yet, when I was a teenager, the game of choice was Quarters. In case you've never heard of it, the object of the game is to bounce a quarter into a small glass. If you miss, you had to drink. Since everyone playing wanted to get drunk, I never understood the motivation to get the quarter in the glass. I hadn't had a drink in months and wasn't good at

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Quarters; I quickly became drunk and nauseous. I ran to the bathroom and leaned over the toilet, puking up the beer I had just drank. Since my teeth were bound together, the beer vomit filled my mouth, then started running out my nose. I couldn't breathe. I suddenly remembered the wire cutters and understood the "emergency" the doctor had referred to. A rush of panic came over me as I realized I was drowning. As the beer spewed forth, the room went black. Just as I started to pass out, I managed to stop vomiting long enough to gasp a little air. After another round of terrifying heaves, I gained control of the gag reflex just as I started to fall unconscious. I didn't drink alcohol for a long time after that.

When the doctor unwired my mouth, he told me to continue eating pureed food for a week because my jaw wouldn't completely open. He was correct. I could only open it a quarter of an inch and to do so caused considerable pain. But I refused to eat hot and sour soup one more day. When I got home, I ordered a Domino's pizza. I had to cut each slice into small pieces, slide each one between my teeth, and chew it between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. That pizza was the absolute best one I've ever eaten.

The car that hit us was driven by a young man named Chris (not my friend, a different Chris), the son of a well-known attorney. He had been drinking earlier that evening and also died in the crash. The *Pensacola News Journal* ran a front-page story about the accident and the perils of drunk driving. The article was headed by a picture of Chris' mom solemnly holding a photo of her dead son. The newspaper didn't have the decency to mention Jeanine's name. I was incensed. Chris murdered my best friend and was given sympathy.

A short time later, I saw his mom on a local public access show discussing teenage drunk driving. I snatched up the phone and attempted to get through. I wanted to tell her Chris was burning in Hell where he belonged for killing my friend Jeanine. HER FUCKING NAME WAS JEANINE!

Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed. Mom, knowing why I kept calling the show, stopped me. She explained that whatever pain I was experiencing, Chris's mom was feeling it on a scale that couldn't compare. And, unlike my anguish, no amount of time will make hers diminish.

I now have children. Two wonderful human beings exist because I gave Jeanine the front seat. If I had not done so, she would be celebrating her 48th birthday this year, and I would be a distant memory only my parents remembered. I now have a minuscule understanding of Chris' mom's pain and am so thankful I didn't make that call.

The red lights Burgess and I ran escaping the angry mailbox owner didn't result in a crash. It was simply delayed three years. The car that hit us was going the same speed we were traveling when we flew through those intersections. When Karma plays her hand, the result can be nasty. Bunny and Burgess were permanently crippled due to the accident. Yet, as severe as my injuries were, I had no long-term effects after I healed. Once again, Karma's bullet missed her target, although that shot was almost a bullseye. I mistook her inaccuracy for invincibility.

The Pawn Shop

Robert finally opened a pawn shop to go along with the safe that sat in our garage for the last ten years. The store was located on a busy highway north of Pensacola. Across the street was a large, undeveloped lot. Robert's friend, Ronnie, had considerable experience in the pawn business and was hired to manage the store. He also had a drinking problem. Although hiring him seemed unwise, my father never made haphazard business decisions. He predicted Ronnie would eventually self-destruct and planned to learn as much as he could about the pawn business before that happened. I was hired to keep an eye on Ronnie. Much like the blind watching the blind.

Under Ronnie's supervision, I learned the basics of the pawn business. I also witnessed various ways to siphon money from the coffers. Just as Robert predicted, Ronnie's drinking became a problem, and he was fired. I stepped into the role of manager. Robert hired Bill, a retired Navy man and close friend, to assist, and probably, keep an eye on me. I was nineteen-years-old, running a business I was unfamiliar with, being assisted by someone who was inherently lazy. Every dime Robert had was on the line. Needless to say, he was a little grumpy sometimes.

Bill and I had to learn the pawn business on the fly. One of my first lessons came from a young lady holding a baby. She told me she needed to pawn a television so she could purchase diapers. In case you are unfamiliar with how a pawn shop works, the customer gives the shop collateral to borrow money against. Once the customer pays the money back, plus interest, the item of value

is returned. The young lady requested an amount much higher than what we would have typically loaned. But I felt sorry for her and gave her what she asked for. When she left, I watched her drive to the liquor store next door. “Do they sell diapers at the liquor store?” I asked Bill.

“Ya’ think she may have lied?” he laughed.

Which brings us to...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies

The Happy Pills

Sherri asked me to accompany her on a trip to Houston to purchase a large quantity of ecstasy, which was legal in Texas at the time. She made frequent trips there. I agreed to be at her house at 5:00 am the next morning.

That same day, Paula invited me to her birthday celebration, which was held at her Aunt Deanne's house. I took a gold necklace from the pawn shop, which was the first time I stole from the business. I wasn't sure if I would get a moment alone with her, but if I did, I planned to do something out-of-character: ask her out on a date.

I was pleased to find Paula's slug of a boyfriend didn't show up for the party. For the first time, I met her family, who would eventually become closer to me than my own. We partied all afternoon and into the evening. As a bonus, some of them enjoyed smoking marijuana. I had a great time.

Later that night, Paula and I went to Sam's, a popular nightclub. I gave her the necklace, and we kissed for the first time. She was a phenomenal kisser, a skill few people possess.

Let's briefly detour from the story to discuss...

The Components of a Good Kiss

Component	Description
Lips	Lips must be soft and moist but not wet. Nonexistent lips are difficult but can be compensated for. Lips that are dry, chapped, or covered with bloody sores are not conducive to a good kiss.
Tongue	The tongue is the body part most similar to a sexual organ. Each participant must use an equal amount. When one person overextends their tongue, the other person will retract theirs. The result is like being gagged by a tongue depressor.
Saliva	Saliva is necessary for a sensual kiss. Without it, the kiss will have the sensation of licking sandpaper. Too much saliva, however, is not only unnecessary but can be a turnoff. If your partner must wipe spit off their face or clean saliva off the floor with a towel, you're using too much.
Mouth	The width of the mouth is vitally important. A mouth opened too wide is like kissing a whale's vagina. A mouth not opened wide enough is like shoving your tongue between the tines of a fork. Both should be opened an equal amount.
Length	One person will determine how long the kiss will last. If you feel your partner pull back, don't lunge forward.
Teeth	Teeth play no part in a kiss

Come to think of it, these tips apply to blowjobs as well. Which means if your partner is a good kisser... well... I'm just saying.

Anyway, back to the story...

Brett Douglas

The next morning, Paula looked at the gold necklace. *Oh, my God!*
Brett asked me out.

Unbeknownst to her, at that very moment, I was sitting next to Sherri driving to Houston. The trip took sixteen hours round-trip. Since we had different tastes in music, we agreed to take turns controlling the radio. Sherri would play her music for an hour, then I would get an hour. I brought a large case filled with CDs. She brought one CD that had one song, “Silent Morning” by Noel, which reminded her of some body-builder douchebag she was in love with. The road trip consisted of a one-hour musical tapestry as varied as a Whiteman’s sampler, followed by one hour of the same song repeatedly played, like a phonograph needle stuck on a scratch. In other words, eight hours of variety and eight hours of the same shitty, ear piercing, bowel-irritating, soul torturing song. Once we scored the ecstasy and dropped a hit, her time wasn’t quite as bad, although it still felt longer than mine.

Upon my return to Pensacola, I called Paula, and, much to my surprise, she didn’t hang up. We agreed to meet, along with her family and some friends, at Kevin’s, a bar on Pensacola Beach.

While I was in Houston, Paula told Richard she was leaving him for me. She said that final visit was the only time in their relationship he demonstrated any interest in her. Funny how we don’t appreciate things until they’re gone.

As we drove to Kevin’s, I handed her a tab of ecstasy. “Take this.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a happy pill.”

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“A happy pill?”

“Trust me. You’ll be happy.”

“My family is meeting us there. Will I be okay?” Paula asked.

“Don’t worry. I have enough for them.”

Neither Paula nor anyone in her crew had ever heard of ecstasy. But they certainly enjoyed it. Our first date was a drug-filled orgy of affection. We all laughed, hugged, fell on the floor, knocked over tables and chairs, and danced endlessly. In every nightclub, a group always exists that is visibly having more fun than anyone else, the one everyone wishes they were part of. On that night, we were that group. A truly epic evening.

Afterward, Paula told me she had never experienced anything like ecstasy. She also said she had never dated anyone like me. At the time, I took that as a compliment. Paula meant it as one. In hindsight, her comment was actually a warning.

Keith embraced my new relationship with great enthusiasm. Paula, Keith, and I, along with another friend, Bill, all dropped acid and went to the Red Garter, a local gay bar. At midnight, the club put on a drag show. The first drag queen was a 300-lb. behemoth who looked like a prize hog with makeup. Bill leaned over and said, “She comes to you in your nightmares.” We fell off our chairs laughing. Once again, we were the group having the most fun in the nightclub.

In one night, Paula took acid for the first time, went to a gay bar for the first time, saw a drag show for the first time, and saw two men kissing for the

first time, one of which was her boss, Keith. Twice in a row, a truly epic evening. At this point, I couldn't chase her away with a shitty mop.

Sherri wasn't as enthusiastic as Keith about my new girlfriend. "Are you dating Paula?"

"Yes."

"Honey, there something about her I don't like."

"What are talking about?"

"I've heard some things she's said about you behind your back."

"Like what?" I asked.

"She was bragging about your family's business, the money and drugs you always seem to have. I think she's using you."

"No, I don't see that," I said as if I could ever see such a thing.

"Well, I know what she said, baby. Just watch your back," Sherri said. She was so pretty and such a good friend.

"You know I will."

Sherri was astute. The pawn shop was growing rapidly. A Walmart was built on the empty lot across the street, causing business to explode. The shop was requiring more of my time, but I still had the weekends to do as I pleased. I always had plenty of money and drugs. Cocaine and I parted ways, with ecstasy and acid taking her place. But the love of my life would return with a vengeance.

The Purple Apartment

Paula moved out of her parents' house and, along with her friend, Donna, rented a one-bedroom apartment which was half of an older home that had been converted into a duplex. It had French doors at the entrance and purple walls. I spent so much time there, I eventually moved in. We never turned on the gas, so the stove didn't work, and the house got cold in the winter. One evening, Paula made spaghetti prepared in an electric wok, which turned out to be the best I'd ever eaten.

Our routine on the weekends was identical to the one Sherri, Lisa, Keith and I had before - trips to Victor's Friday and Saturday night and a constant supply of weed, ecstasy, and acid. After forty-eight hours of partying, we slept Sunday away and were ready for work Monday morning.

One evening, Paula's friend, Micki, came by our apartment. She was short with curly black hair, a faintly ruddy complexion, a curvaceous figure, and a bubble butt. I was playing a video game and didn't pay attention to her.

A few weeks later, Paula and I went to New Orleans with some friends. After drinking all night, I left the group and was abandoned on Bourbon Street while everyone else drove home. By happenstance, I saw Micki in Pat O'Brien's, one of the most famous bars in New Orleans. I stayed an extra day and partied with her. That night, as we slept in a hotel, I woke up to her lying on top of me, naked. I didn't fight it.

Upon our return to Pensacola, she introduced me to cocaine's mean little sister...

Crack

If you've never smoked crack and want to know what it's like, have an orgasm, enjoy it for thirty seconds, then clamp a clothespin on your left testicle until you have the next one. If you're female, replace the clothespin on the testicle with a hemostat on your left nipple.

Micki took me to Escambia Arms, a housing project where most of the residents were indeed armed. We purchased crack from a random black guy on a street corner. Seemed easy enough.

Whenever I had time, I bought crack, went to Micki's apartment, smoked it and then had sex with her. Smoking cocaine affected me in a way snorting or injecting the substance didn't. After the first hit, I got an erection. Any sexual reticence I suffered from disappeared. The shyness I typically felt around the opposite sex evaporated.

I need to be clear on this point. I didn't become a sexual predator. No matter how amped-up I was, I never made unwanted sexual advances. I've never understood why a rapist would want to have sex with a woman who was fighting back, vocally protesting, and visibly revolted. That person is a sociopath, which I am not. Pleasing a woman is the most arousing part of sex. Thus, she must be a willing participant. Smoking cocaine removed my inhibitions, allowing me to bluntly ask, "Would you like to have sex with me?" Sober Brett would never consider such a presumptuous move.

American Drug Addict

I hate hackneyed expressions, but here goes. I was a real Dr. Jekyll
and Mr. Hyde.

Or better yet, a real Dr. Brettles and Mr. Hide-The-Sausage.

I kill me.

The following song describes the life of a crackhead better than I possibly could.

Down in a Rabbit Hole

by
Bright Eyes

I heard you fell into a rabbit hole
Covered yourself up with snow
Baby, tell me where'd you go
For days and days
Did they make you stay up all night?
Did they paint your face that pasty white?
You're thirsty, but your appetite is chased away

The sun turns us to stone
It's a cloudy day
But we still can't go
Open our back cellar door
Till we see the moon
We're invisible

No one ever takes the garbage out
A kid gets dared to touch the house
He runs back only to announce, there's no one there
Does he paint the foil with a flame?
Smell the soda, taste butane
For every fear that can't be named to calm you down

Your heart starts skipping steps
So you're farther gone
Then you might expect
If your thoughts should turn to death
Got to stomp them out
Like cigarettes

You may be thinking, *Driving a nice car into a ghetto with a fist full of money and purchasing crack from a heavily armed black guy whom I've never met nor will ever see again sounds easy. I think I'll try that.* Well, as difficult as this may be to fathom, some pitfalls to this scenario exist. After reading this page, please remove it from the book and wring out the sarcasm.

Let me list some of the pitfalls I've personally experienced.

- 1) Purchasing pieces of soap, wax, rocks, and other things that weren't crack.
- 2) My driver side window was smashed out, my car keys stolen, and I was robbed.
- 3) A screwdriver was pushed against my neck, and I was robbed.
- 4) A razorblade was pushed against my neck until it drew blood, and I was robbed.
- 5) A gun was stuck to my head, and I was robbed. Two weeks later, a young man pawned a miter saw at our store. One week after that, an older man came into the store and wanted to retrieve it. I informed him only the person who pawned the item could pick it up. He produced a death certificate and explained his son had pawned the saw, went to Escambia Arms to buy crack, and was shot and killed, the same place I had a gun put to my head three weeks prior.

But the crazy part, that's right, you haven't heard the crazy part yet, is every time I had my life threatened and was robbed, I immediately got more money and went back to the same spot. Death was a reasonable risk.

I hid my new habit from Paula. At least for the time being.

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I have a vision of Jeff Foxworthy performing a version of his famous routine. Imagine his voice. "If you drive back to the same spot to score crack after being robbed at gunpoint, you might be an addict."

Duke

Instead of buying coke from Keith, I started dealing with his supplier, Sherri's boyfriend, Duke. Unlike most of my male friends, he had a lot in common with me. We both came from affluent families, were heterosexual, and loved to party. He was in better physical shape than I, a result of my affinity for inertia, and was better looking than me, not a high hurdle.

Duke had one characteristic I didn't envy - cocaine caused him to have seizures. Since our illicit activities were financed by him selling the drug, they became a problem. After one particular weekend of heavy partying, Duke had to spend several days in the hospital. By happenstance, Paula was at her Army Reserve camp. I found myself at Duke's house with his friend, Tom, and several ounces of cocaine, with no girlfriend or homeowner to contend with.

Tom taught me how to reduce cocaine to a smokable form using ammonia and a coffee filter, a process I will not divulge. We freebased coke for three days, never leaving the house. Afterward, I was quite horny, so I went to Micki's to relieve the tension. She told me she wasn't interested; she thought I was using her for sex, a point I thought was understood from the beginning.

Paula eventually discovered the truth about my infidelity, although I denied the obvious, a coping mechanism I frequently used. The last time I saw Micki was when Paula beat the shit out of her. My relationships usually end in this ungracious manner, if you haven't noticed.

I eventually smoked crack with Paula, although she wasn't as enthusiastic about it as I. Since I could cook my own dope, I said goodbye to the black guys in the projects, although it wasn't face-to-face. I also said goodbye to the needles, although it was more of a 'see ya' later.'

Allison

Of all Paula's friends, the one I disliked and, for some reason, spent the most time with, was Allison. I didn't always feel such animosity toward her. Once, Paula, Allison and I had a threesome. My feelings were an acquired hatred. She had long, straight, blonde hair and an odd figure. Imagine an egg with two toothpicks for legs and feet positioned like Charlie Chaplin. Her face reminded me of trailer park fodder. Yes, Paula and I had sex with this woman.

My negative feelings toward Allison started the night we had to take her back to our apartment early in the evening because she drank too much, a common occurrence for her. Donna had claimed the only bedroom, so Paula and I slept on a mattress in the living room. We laid Allison down and went back out. Several hours later, we returned to find she had pissed in our only

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bed. I was furious. “What the fuck are we supposed to sleep on, you stupid bitch?!”

“Brett, calm down. Just drive her back to her car,” Paula said.

Her car was at Applebee’s, which was more than ten miles away. I stomped to my car, sat behind the wheel and watched her slowly stagger into the passenger seat. I took one look at her trailer-park face and said, “I’m not driving you anywhere. Get the fuck out!” I watched her stumble into the darkness.

I marched into the living room and dragged the damp mattress to the roadside next to our garbage can. Paula and I slept on a Papason pillow for the remainder of our stay in the purple apartment.

Allison was humorous at times. She once climbed on a wooden carousel horse on display in Applebee’s and rode it like a bull rider. Mostly though, her antics turned my stomach. Can you imagine someone turning *my* stomach?

I know you want an example.

We took Allison to the Pensacola Interstate Fair. After several beers, she wanted some nachos. Once the chips were gone, she started eating the cheese sauce with her fingers.

I know that doesn’t sound bad, so let me create a mental image for you. Imagine a crowded walkway at the fair. You turn around and see the drunk, egg-shaped woman who recently pissed in your bed, walking with her feet

pointing in opposite directions and an “I’m too ignorant to know how ignorant I am” smile on her low-rent face, holding a paper nacho tray and running her index and middle finger through the cheese and licking it off. I think you understand now.

I told her multiple times to wash her hands before she got in my car, which turned out to be the least of my concerns. When the fair closed, and people streamed into the parking lot, Allison dropped her pants and pissed in front of them all.

After that incident, I refused to accompany Paula when she went out if Allison was with her.

Nine Inch Nails

I loved smoking crack while repeatedly listening to the song “Mr. Self-Destruct” by Nine Inch Nails, a band with only one member, Trent Reznor. He’s very open about his struggle with addiction, and his music articulates this despair brutally yet eloquently. No song exemplifies the insanity of drug use, specifically how it controls and destroys your life, better than “Mr. Self-Destruct.” As compelling as the lyrics are, the music expresses this insanity even stronger. In my opinion, it’s one of the greatest songs ever recorded.

Mr. Self-Destruct

by
Nine Inch Nails

I am the voice inside your head
(and I control you)
I am the lover in your bed
(and I control you)
I am the sex that you denied
(and I control you)
I am the hate you try to hide
(and I control you)

I take you where you want to go
I give you all you need to know
I drag you down. I use you up.
Mr. Self-Destruct

I speak religion's message clear
(and I control you)
I am denial, guilt, and fear
(and I control you)
I am the prayers of the naïve
(and I control you)
I am the lie that you believe
(and I control you)

I take you where you want to go
I give you all you need to know
I drag you down. I use you up.
Mr. Self-Destruct
You let me do this to you
(I am the exit)
You let me do this to you
(I am the exit)

I am the needle in the vein
I am the high you can't sustain
I am the pusher. I am the whore
I am the need you feel for more

I am the bullet in the gun
(and I control you)
I am the truth from which you run
(and I control you)

I am the silencing machine
(and I control you)
I am the end of all your dreams
(and I control you)

I take you where you want to go
I give you all you need to know
I drag you down. I use you up.
Mr. Self-Destruct

I believe I've deciphered the meaning of the band's name, although I'm postulating. I noticed a 1cc hypodermic syringe, when full, is about nine inches long from the tip of the needle to the end of the extended plunger. Well, that's what I choose to believe.

"Mr. Self-Destruct" is the opening track to the ground-breaking album *The Downward Spiral*, which was recorded in Sharon Tate's living room before the house was demolished. In case you didn't know, the Manson family murdered Ms. Tate and three other people in that very room. The darkness of that location permeates the entire album. It's so dark, *Spin* magazine voted "The Downward Spiral" as the #1 album to commit suicide to. But I would choose a different Nine Inch Nails album.

The Termites

Besides the episode with Micki, my relationship with Paula was pleasantly exciting. The pawn shop continued to grow, and I did everything in my power to make it successful. In fact, it was so profitable, I took money from the drawer every day without anyone noticing. I never left home without hundreds of dollars in my pocket. Plus, Paula still worked at Applebee's, bringing even more cash home. We seldom fought, and sex was at least once a day, if not more. We seemed compatible. Not to mention, I loved having a beauty like her on my arm when we went out.

Yet, much like termites starting their assault on a home's foundation, the minuscule fractures in our relationship were impossible to see. We both fulfilled unspoken needs for the other. I wanted a trophy girlfriend. Paula wanted financial security. Perhaps all relationships are superficial to a degree in the beginning, but drugs deaden feelings. Experiencing real emotions is hardly possible when you're high. We operated on trivial impulses.

Paula had a possessiveness I recoiled from. She didn't like anything diverting my attention from her. I wanted to be part of Paula's life. She wanted me to *be* her life. Keeping with the revelation I had after Adrienne's departure, I made sure I was "one up" in our relationship in a big way. I controlled the money and the drugs. I went into the partnership partly detached as a way of maintaining the upper hand. I never displayed jealousy, even when the feeling was killing me. I purposely separated from her in social situations, causing her

to pine for my attention much like a puppy following its mother. I would not allow myself to be “one-down.”

When termites start their assault on a structure, it shows no discernable signs of instability. Much was our relationship. It appeared stable. We were two young people trying to secure our footing in a wild love affair. But, as we all know, ignoring termites never makes them go away.

My Oldest Child

Paula and I were partying and doing drugs when she became pregnant. Paula and her mother made the decision to have an abortion. I'm not saying we didn't discuss it. But abortion seemed like a foregone conclusion.

The rationalization for this decision was we were young, irresponsible and single. We wanted to spare the child from a life of dysfunction. I wish the real motivation were as benevolent. The unspoken reason was one of convenience. We didn't want to change our lifestyle. If a dysfunctional home life were a concern, we never should have had any children.

Years passed before I mentally visited this decision again. As I looked at a portrait of my family posing on Pensacola Beach, myself and Paula, Devin, who was eight years old, and Jordan, who was five, I imagined my oldest child standing behind me with their hand on my shoulder. My child would have been a teenager when that portrait was taken. I wondered which traits my child would have inherited. Would they have loved me like Jordan, or despised me like Devin? What would he or she have looked like? What would have been their interests, favorite foods, music, and movies?

Of course, thinking of such things is like thinking about the winning lottery numbers I didn't pick. What's done is done. Up until that moment, I always considered myself pro-choice. Now, I'm not sure. As I write these words, I am openly weeping for my oldest child, whom I will never have the joy of meeting.

The Blue and Red Marbles

Paula and I moved out of the purple apartment and into Cordova Regency. For us, life was a long string of drug-laden parties, the current one being crazier than the last. We occasionally withdrew from our friends to smoke crack, but afterward, resumed our social drug use. Acid and ecstasy filled our weekends. For me, marijuana was a constant. I was known as a “wake-and-baker,” which was someone who got stoned as soon as they woke up and stayed stoned throughout the day until they went to sleep. I had not gone a single day without smoking pot since I was a teenager.

Most weekends were spent at Victor’s, followed by an after-party, which lasted through the next day. Once, I purchased a large quantity of ecstasy to sell. I was the least successful drug dealer in history. Since I already had plenty of money, I didn’t do it for profit. I wanted to be the center of attention and have girls chase me down in front of Paula. But, most of all, I didn’t want to run out.

Before we left for Fort Walton, Paula took several hits at once. Taking too much ecstasy causes the person to fall into a dream-like state, resulting in vivid, realistic visions. As I drove down Highway 98 moving at a brisk 60 mph, Paula, in this ecstasy-induced dream-state says, “Okay, I’m going to call Sharon.” She opened the car door. As she stepped out of the moving vehicle, I grabbed her arm and pulled her back into the seat.

“What the fuck are you doing?!”

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Paula snapped back into reality. “Oh my God! I thought we were back home.” That was the first time I saved her life.

On a typical evening at Victor’s, finding ecstasy was easy. Everyone sold it. But on this particular night, I was the only person holding. By midnight, I had sold most of my pills. As Paula and I danced on the steps overlooking the nightclub, I paused and looked out over the crowd. *Everyone* was dancing: on the dancefloor, on the tables, at the bar, and behind the DJ booth. That moment was a religious experience for me. I felt like God looking out over his creation.

By the end of the evening, we were trolling, which is taking acid along with ecstasy, which enhances the euphoria. We were driving to an after-party with Sharon and her boyfriend, Troy, when I noticed something. “Oh my God! I’m seeing blue and red marbles bouncing on the road in front of us.”

“Holy shit! I see them too!” Paula said as she peered out the windshield.

Sharon and Troy leaned forward from the backseat and looked at the highway rushing in front of the car. “What the fuck? I see them,” Sharon laughed.

“Me too,” Troy said.

“Do you know what this means?” I asked in a serious tone. “We’re having a group hallucination.” We fell out laughing.

Those days were a continuous string of intoxicated parties and drug-induced stupidity. Eventually, I turned twenty-one.

The Birthday

Keith, Sharon, Duke, Bill, Paula and I decided to celebrate my 21st birthday in New Orleans. Minutes before midnight, as we partied on the back patio of Pat O'Brien's, I asked my crew to sit down at one of the tables and pulled an identification card from my pocket. "When I worked at Applebee's, I found this military ID and a deposit ticket in a jacket that was left at table fifty-two." Everyone took turns examining it. "Remember when I got that ounce of coke from you?"

"Yes," Keith reluctantly answered.

"Well, right before I saw you that day, I went to this guy's bank and emptied his account. I got his account number off the deposit ticket."

Stunned silence at the table. A few jaws hung open.

"Since then, I have used this ID to get into clubs and buy liquor. For years, I held my breath every time I used it because I knew I risked being tied to the theft. I don't even look like this faggot." Laughter at the table. Good. My friends won't disown me for being a royal douche.

I dragged an ashtray across the table, positioning it in front of me. I pulled a lighter from my pocket and lit the corner of the ID. We watched it burn to ashes.

"The days of me holding my breath are over," I triumphantly announced. Another addition to my delusion of invincibility. To the man I stole the money from, I am truly sorry.

The Throbbing Asshole

After the wonderful weekend in New Orleans, the carefree party seemed to darken. One typical evening at Victor's, a girl who was trolling with us collapsed. I watched her eyes roll back and face explode in sweat. She was dead before the paramedics arrived.

Witnessing her death was disturbing, so naturally, I wanted to get stoned. I walked into the parking lot; my car was parked at the other end. I noticed a stranger walking several yards in front of me. Suddenly, a truck full of men with baseball bats pulled up to him. They jumped out and started beating him repeatedly. I quickly ducked out of sight. His mangled body was left lying behind my car. Moments later, a police cruiser and an ambulance arrived at the stranger's motionless body. *How am I supposed to get stoned with all this shit going on behind my car?*

Our group was rather somber when Victor's closed for the evening. As I rolled a joint for the trip home, we sat in my car and watched party-goers run across the highway. Without warning, a woman was hit by a car. She flew twenty feet from where she was standing, landed on the asphalt, started to push herself up, and collapsed. She never moved after that. We stopped going to Victor's.

Soon after, Duke had another seizure. As we visited in his hospital room, he asked a favor. He had planned to pick up an ounce of cocaine from a Greyhound Bus station later that evening and asked if I would retrieve the

package instead and take it to his friend, Bill (not Keith's friend, but Duke's throbbing asshole friend, Bill). I agreed.

At the bus station, I handed the ticket to one of the two clerks, who were both teenagers. The clerk with the ticket shot the other one a sinister glance. He disappeared into the back and returned with a tattered package. They wore sheepish grins as I left.

I brought a spoon and a needle with me and planned to do a monster shot before I delivered the package to Bill. I quickly pulled into a self-serve car wash and examined the box, which reeked of cinnamon. It was poorly taped as if it had been opened already. The box was full of cinnamon packets, but no cocaine. I instantly knew what was about to happen.

Throbbing asshole Bill was a musician, which was surprising because he was the exact opposite of the stereotypical artist. He had the personality of a fire hydrant. Talking to him was as enthralling as watching centipedes fuck. Stiff and stoic, he let me know he thought I stole the dope. I emphatically denied the accusation. Yet, I had not made a good case for myself. Duke knew my appetite for cocaine, and after our trip to New Orleans, he knew I was a thief. I never understood why Bill didn't get the package himself. Despite my protests, I never convinced Duke I didn't steal from him, and our friendship never recovered.

The Roommates

Robert allowed me and Paula to stay in one of his rental properties free-of-charge. The offer was very generous. The only condition was we had to repair and maintain the place, which would help him find a new tenant once we moved out. We agreed.

The house was in Mayfair, which was an older subdivision, although most of the homes on our street were nice. The one exception was a crack house located four doors down. It was in a drastic state of disrepair and had a constant stream of brief visitors all hours of the day and night. One would think I would quickly become their next customer, but the house was so shady, I was afraid to approach it. I know that's hard to imagine.

Our house had a crawl space underneath and was surrounded by oak trees. Thus, we had a significant roach problem. And Paula suffered from katsaridaphobia, which made life in the house challenging. Pulling into the driveway at night was like the final scene of the movie *Creep Show*. As soon as the headlights illuminated the carport, roaches scattered everywhere. I had to clear a path before she would exit the car. Roaches attacked our dinner while Paula was preparing it. Roaches fell on our heads from the door frames. We were even assaulted in our bedroom. Paula and I were reading in bed when we heard the unmistakable sound of fluttering insect wings, followed by the crunchy thud of an insect hitting the wall above our heads. We leapt from the bed. The Black Bart, the name Paula assigned to giant cockroaches, landed on

the floor and ran toward her. She bolted, gloriously naked, from the room screaming.

Paula's fear was beyond irrational. Once, she called me while I was at work. "Brett, there's a Black Bart in the closet!"

"Okay, kill it," I said.

"Awww! I can't. It's too big."

"Okay. Don't kill it."

"I put a cup over it."

"I'm not sure what the purpose of this call is."

"Will you kill it when you get home tonight?" Paula asked.

"I thought I would take it for a walk instead."

"Brett!"

"Okay, okay, I'll kill it. You could have asked me this when I got home."

"I just wanted to warn you."

"I'll get mentally prepared for the execution before I get there."

In addition to our hundreds of small roommates, something was living in our attic. We could hear it moving as we lay in bed. I knew whatever it was, it had to be large, because the creature never moved quickly, even when I hit the ceiling with a broom handle.

One evening, as I walked into the utility room, I discovered what it was. Above my head, walking along the top shelf, was the largest rat I had ever seen. When I turned the light on, it stopped, looked directly at me with an "Oh,

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it's only a human" look, and slowly continued its journey. The rodent was so scary looking, I let it live in our attic.

Despite the age of our new home, Paula kept the house as clean and pest free as she could. She had a place for everything and was annoyed with clutter. My propensity for slovenliness was a continuing point of contention. She was also obsessed with her appearance. She spent two hours every morning putting on makeup and doing her hair. Paula *always* looked picture perfect, even when we were at home. She reminded me of June Cleaver cleaning the house while wearing high heels and a pearl necklace. At the time, I took her preoccupation as a positive attribute.

The Dry Spell

For ten years, I managed to stay stoned. And I literally mean every day of that period. Unless I was sleeping, I was smoking pot. But soon after moving into our new home, a dry spell occurred, which typically happened in late summer before the plants were harvested. Today, marijuana is grown indoors, making dry spells uncommon. All my sources were out. I even went through my parents' drawers, to no avail. In case you didn't know, marijuana doesn't cause physical withdrawal symptoms, thus physically, I felt fine. But mentally, I was a basket case. Whereas I was typically smiling and joking, happy and amiable, now my mood was dark and brooding. Work was drudgery, and once I got home, I sulked on the couch, which was next to the end table where I kept

my pot and paraphernalia. My sour mood got so bad, Paula started making calls to her friends on my behalf in search of the coveted green substance. She said things like, "If not having pot affects you like this, perhaps you should quit."

To some degree, I knew she was on point. But my addict pretzel-logic always prevailed. "So let me make sure I understand you. Since not having pot puts me in a bad mood, I should continue not having pot? Whatever."

Reasoning with an addict is like teaching a cat to bark; it's very frustrating and usually results in failure.

After two agonizing weeks of abstinence, Paula called me at work to tell me she found some. I raced home on my lunch hour, rushed through the door, grabbed the bag of dope from her hand, and sat in my usual spot on the couch. As I rummaged through my stash drawer looking for rolling papers, I found something I didn't expect: a second bag of pot which was hidden in the drawer the entire time. I had the only bag of weed in Pensacola within arm's reach while I suffered, although, at the time, I had no idea what real suffering was. When Paula saw it, she couldn't help but laugh, much like laughing at an oncoming train as you stand on the tracks.

Despite our new living quarters, our partying had not abated. The only aspect of our drug use that changed was the frequency in which we got high alone instead of going out with friends.

The Darkness

I graduated with my Associates of Arts degree from Pensacola Junior College. Robert paid for my first term, but I dropped all my classes. Afterward, he told me he would never again pay for my school, and he kept his word. I discovered I was a lot less likely to drop classes when my own money was on the line. Paula enrolled in nursing school, which I gladly paid for. I made more money than a person in their early twenties should make, at least someone with the habits I was developing.

Paula was an incredibly sound sleeper, so I got in the habit of smoking crack and watching pornography at night. Eventually, I got bored with watching sex, so I started sneaking out of the house and getting high with prostitutes. I never had intercourse with these women, rationalizing that a blowjob was safe, and didn't fall into the "sex" category. For the second time in my life, I pulled a Bill Clinton. Of course, the fact I never told Paula what I did at night indicated I was doing something I shouldn't. On more than one occasion, I slipped into bed minutes, sometimes seconds, before her alarm sounded, giving the appearance I had been sleeping next to her the entire night.

Despite my evening outings, I did cocaine with Paula most of the time. Although I thought I was bulletproof, I discovered my Kevlar had a vulnerability. After a four-day binge, I started to feel strange. We all instinctively know when our bodies cross the boundary from okay to not-okay, no matter how subtle the change may be. I stood from the couch. "Something's not right."

“What are you talking about?” Paula asked, assuming I was joking.

“Something’s not right with me,” I blurted out in a panicked voice. A tingling numbness started in my fingers and toes and began slowly moving up my arms and legs. I placed my hands on Paula’s shoulders to brace myself.

“Brett! What’s wrong!?”

I looked at her but couldn’t speak. My extremities were paralyzed, and my hands were drawn up in a cramped position. Waves of darkness hit me with increased frequency as I struggled to keep my eyes open. With each slowing heartbeat, my body throbbed with the tingling numbness that stole my arms and legs.

“Oh my God! I’m calling 911!”

“No,” I managed to mumble as I fell to my knees and wrapped my arms around her waist. Upon touching her, I felt the numbness subsiding. After the deathly feeling had waned, we decided to get some rest. Each time sleep tried to take me, I fought it, afraid I would never awaken.

The next morning, we finished the cocaine. I never determined what exactly happened. We wrote it off as a panic attack or sleep deprivation. But the Darkness, as I called it, started occurring regularly. Of course, the risk of encountering the Darkness didn’t stop me from using. On multiple occasions, when this feeling slipped over me, I called an ambulance. Strangely, as soon as I hung up the phone and knew help was in route, it subsided. By the time the paramedics arrived, I felt normal. I did this so many times, I knew the ambulance driver by name. Ken always said the same thing to me, “Stick to the natural stuff, Brett.”

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Wait! What's that I hear?

I think it's Jeff Foxworthy again.

"If you know the ambulance driver on a first name basis, you might be an addict."

The Issue

One Friday afternoon, Robert asked me to come to his house. He needed help loading his dining room table, which was his grandmother's and of some considerable value, into the bed of his truck so he could have it refinished. It was covered with numerous round indentions, which he attributed to normal use. But I knew the actual cause of the damage; it was from my friends and me playing Quarters. I helped him load the table and went back to work.

That evening, Paula and I started a two-day cocaine binge. As the sun rose early Sunday morning, we prepared to sleep the day away. The phone rang. "Is this Brett?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Yes, it is."

"This is Fire Marshall Bill with the Pensacola Fire Department. Do you know where your parents are?"

"No, sir. What's going on?"

"We have an issue at their house on Newton Drive."

"What kind of issue?"

"I can't talk to you about that. We need you to come to Newton Drive as soon as possible."

"Okay, but what's the issue?"

"We can only discuss that with the homeowner."

Exhausted, we drove to my parents' house. Upon our arrival, the "issue" was obvious. My childhood home had burned to the ground. Neighbors filled the street, watching the firefighters work. Although the fire had been extinguished, the entire house was in ashes. Paula and I were frantic. The fire marshal again asked where my parents were. As the implication of his question dawned on me, he assured me no one was in the house. He then hammered me with a series of questions about my parents' finances and the stability of their relationship. I was in no mood to talk.

We drove to Memaw and Pawpaw's house. They told me Mom was in Vero Beach visiting Dorothy and Harwell. "Oh my God, Mom!" I cried into the receiver.

"It's going to be okay. Just relax."

"Your house burned down! Everything's gone! We don't know where Robert is!" I sobbed.

"Your father's on a fishing trip. Now calm down. Everything's going to be okay. Now, you and Paula go home, and I'll call you later this afternoon," Mom said in a calm, reassuring voice.

As we drove home, something disturbing occurred to me. "The first thing Mom did on the phone was console me," I said.

"Of course she did."

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“No, you don’t understand. She never asked me *why* I was crying.”

The house fire is a topic that is off limits in my family. I still wonder about it to this day.

The Ultimatum

One day, Paula unexpectedly asked, “You’re going to ask me to marry you, right?” I nodded.

Some days went by. Again, she asked, “We’re getting married, right?” I nodded.

More days went by. She stopped asking. “Either marry me, or I’m moving out.”

“Can I sleep on it?” Paula didn’t think my joke was funny. *What’s the rush?* We’d been living together for four years; I thought our arrangement was perfect.

“Marry me, or I’m moving out,” she reiterated without smiling. I could take a hint. I acquired an engagement ring through the pawn shop and proposed at Jubilee’s, a restaurant on Pensacola Beach. Oddly enough, she acted surprised.

Paula and I were now engaged. The next decision was the location of the ceremony. Several churches were suggested, but I was afraid I would burst

Brett Douglas

into flames if I walked into one. I wasn't sure if God had forgotten about that "Fuck Jesus" thing. Strange how I was concerned about the feelings of an imaginary deity. Plus, I didn't know where any churches were located, which was remarkable because Pensacola has more churches than traffic lights. I did, however, know where the bars were.

Paula and I were to be married at Seville Quarter, which had a large outdoor patio. The event was set.

The place was Seville Quarter.

The date was June 29, 1991.

The only thing left was...

The Bachelor Party

Thus far, I have described the circumstances which led to an epiphany, then restated it in a list of truisms. This time, however, I will present the list first.

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies
12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding

The night before my wedding, a limousine pulled up to my parents' house. Inside were Keith, Bill (not throbbing asshole Bill), and several other friends. Unbeknownst to the party-goers, Keith and I had been doing cocaine the previous evening. I was already forty-eight hours without sleep. Thus necessity dictated I purchase an 8-ball, which is 1/8 ounce of cocaine, to stay coherent. Of course, I didn't share. We did the typical bachelor party stuff: went to strip clubs, drank, and got lap dances. The strippers dragged me up on stage, pulled my pants down, and shook their tits at me. At 2 am, the limo took everyone home, except Keith and me. I purchased another 8-ball and gave the driver \$400 to take us to The Place, a bottle club that stayed open until 5 am. I walked up to the first attractive woman I saw on the dance floor and asked, "You wanna' party with me and my friend?"

"Hell, yes!"

Keith, the girl, and I did lines of coke and had sex in the back of the limo. I guess he wasn't as gay as I thought. I knew Paula was staying at her mother's house, so when the time ran out on the limo, the three of us went back to my house, did more cocaine and had more sex.

Before long, 10 am rolled around; I was getting married in three hours. I took Keith and the girl home and purchased two more 8-balls. At this point, I had gone sixty hours without sleep and expended a considerable amount of physical exertion. Cocaine was the only reason I was still alert. I drove to my parents' house to get dressed for...

The Wedding

I've always felt like I stumble through life, like I'm rudderless, going wherever the current takes me. I've never been in control, bouncing around like a ball in a pinball machine, serendipitously falling into favorable circumstances, blind luck being my only guide. As I drove to my wedding, the reality of what was about to occur dawned on me. I wondered how all this had happened. How did someone like me end up getting married? How did I end up running a business? Why am I still alive? I felt like an outside observer to my own life.

I gingerly walked into Seville, not knowing what to expect. Every family member and friend I had ever known throughout my entire life was there, and I was *Fucked-Up!* To make matters worse, waves of fatigue crashed over me. I had to pull off a good performance for these people.

Paula descended the stairs in her flowing bridal gown. She was as exquisitely stunning a bride as any woman could be. I later learned the photographer who was hired for the occasion mounted a large print of her in the lobby of his studio. Paula was picture perfect. When I saw her for the first time in her gown, I knew this was for real.

That day in June was sweltering. As we posed for the wedding pictures on the back patio, Paula kept calling for a rag to tamp the sweat from her face. I looked embalmed in those pictures. When the ceremony started, I couldn't hear the justice of the peace, focusing instead on a bead of sweat hanging from the tip of his nose. But before it had a chance to fall, Paula and I were husband

and wife. And since we were on the back patio of a bar, no time was wasted driving to the reception.

Paula made the mistake of assuming I was current on wedding rituals. I was told to kneel, and she put her leg across my knee. As the photographer positioned himself, I blankly looked at her. "Take it off. Take it off," she whispered. So, I took her shoe off. Apparently, I was supposed to remove her garter. Our wedding album had an epic picture of Paula with a "What a dumbass!" expression as I held her shoe.

The reception was a lot of fun, a once in a lifetime experience where everyone from my past was in one location. And they're all paying attention to me. And we're in a bar! And I had cocaine! And I didn't have to share! A truly monumental evening. I was quite disappointed when, at 9 pm, I was told the party was over. Mom broke the news to me. "Brett, the carriage is here."

"Carriage?"

"Yes, to take you and Paula to the Hilton."

"Well, I'm having fun. Tell'em to wait outside."

"No Brett, you have to consummate your marriage."

"Shit, I did that years ago."

"Brett, your bride is waiting. Get your ass in that carriage." Mom laughed.

I ran to the bathroom, snorted a huge line of coke, and walked outside with Paula. I was seventy-two hours without sleep and feeling rather punchy. I didn't know what Mom meant by "carriage," but, as we walked through the showers of birdseed, I was pleased to see a horse drawn buggy with a "Just

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Married” sign on the back. Paula and I rode through downtown Pensacola, kissing and staring into each other’s eyes. I realized I hadn’t looked at her in a while. The person I spent the most time with had become part of the background, like a piece of living room furniture. I suddenly noticed the woman I fell in love with. The carriage ride was a romantic moment for me, a brief pause from the static.

The honeymoon suite at the Hilton was incredible. The room was located on the top floor and took up two stories, connected by a spiral staircase. A Jacuzzi adorned the upper floor. Paula stripped off her clothes, grabbed a bottle of champagne, and started climbing. She almost made it to the top, but stumbled and rolled down the staircase, which was located directly in front of the window; everyone in Pensacola saw her fall.

Paula and I were scheduled to board an airplane at 7 am to Puerto Rico, the start of a seven-day cruise which was a honeymoon gift from my parents. After a robust romp in the bed and another in the Jacuzzi, she passed out. The time was 4 am. Since I had been awake for eighty hours, I knew if I slept, we would miss the flight. I started seeing the “shadow men,” a hallucination caused by sleep deprivation where people seem to dart just out of your peripheral vision. I watched television and snorted cocaine until 6 am. We had one hour to pack and get to the airport. I attempted to wake her.

“Paula.” I shook her. “Paula.” No response. “Paula!” I shook her harder. “Paula!” Still no response. “PAULA!” I shook her vigorously.

“What?” She was not happy about being roused.

“Get up. We gotta’ get to the airport.”

“Okay.” She fell back asleep.

“PAULA!” I sat her upright.

“What the fuck do you want?!” she screamed, her eyes not fully open.

“Get up! We have a plane to catch!”

“Just go without me.” She laid down and closed her eyes.

“PAULA!” I bellowed as I sat her up again. “When you wake up at noon, and I’m in Puerto Rico by myself, you’re not going to be happy. NOW, GET UP!” I pulled her out of bed.

“Fuck you, asshole!” *Bea was the last person to slur those words at me.*

Paula struggled up the stairs. I removed our suitcase from the closet and frantically started packing our belongings. The time was 6:20 am. I heard the shower start. I ran up the steps and found Paula stepping into the tub. I turned the water off. “We don’t have time for a shower. Help me put this shit in our suitcase.”

“You’re a fucking asshole.”

I popped open a bottle of champagne. “Drink this.”

She didn’t need my instruction. The time was 6:30 am. Paula grabbed her makeup case, which I ripped from her hand.

“Give me that, you motherfucker!”

“Look at me.” I grabbed both sides of her head, forcing her eyes to meet mine. *This angry face was lovingly looking at me just six hours ago.* “In twenty minutes, I’m going to be on a plane headed to Puerto Rico. If you want

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to go with me, grab your fucking shit right fucking now or this will be the shortest fucking marriage in history.”

I don't know if my speech or the champagne jolted her, but she suddenly understood. We quickly packed our belongings, jumped in the car, and sped to the airport. The time was 6:50 am.

Lucky for us, Islamic assholes had not yet used airplanes to pull off an audacious terrorist attack against our country. Thus the boarding process was quick. We approached the gate just as the attendants were closing it. Thirty seconds later, we would have missed the flight.

Paula slept on the airplane, while I made frequent trips to the restroom to snort lines. My nose was raw and painful to the touch, and swells of fatigue caused recurring bouts of unconsciousness. I fought to stay awake. Each subsequent walk to the restroom was more labored than the last. My body was surrendering.

I snorted the last line of coke at the San Juan airport, which was quite different from the ones in the States. Everything was written in Spanish, and chickens were walking around the baggage carousel. We boarded a bus and started the hour-and-a-half drive to the cruise ship. At this point, I had gone ninety-four hours without sleep. With no cocaine left, I passed out as soon as I sat down. I woke up with a sizable puddle of drool on the front of my shirt. However unlikely, we made it to the ship.

At the time, I attributed our successful arrival to drugs. Without cocaine, I wouldn't have been able to stay awake, and we would have missed our honeymoon. Of course, cocaine was the cause of my sleep loss in the first

place. Drugs give the illusion of making life easier when in reality, they make everything a chore. I couldn't see this fact because I had never lived without them. Every endeavor in my life was chaotic and burdensome.

The honeymoon was incredible, although we slept for the first twenty-four hours.

Fuzzy

I have never been a lover of pets. Why own something that increases my list of responsibilities? When Paula and I started dating, she asked if we could get a cat. I said, "No," because I didn't want to be bothered with feeding or cleaning up after it. I discovered when Paula asked for my blessing about something she wanted, the decision had already been made. The question was a formality of politeness.

Soon after, I found a small kitten in our apartment. We were now pet owners. "Isn't she cute?" Paula asked, trying to lighten my mood. "What should we name her?"

"Let's call her Sebastian," I suggested.

So, naturally, we called her Fuzzy.

Although I wasn't enthusiastic about having a pet at first, Fuzzy became a member of the family. Every night, Paula called the cat's name, and

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it responded by jumping on the bed, climbing under the covers, and balling up next to her. She loved that animal.

Before we left on our honeymoon, Paula asked Keith to watch our house and feed Fuzzy. Upon our return, we were shocked to find the cat had not been fed. Keith said he wasn't feeling well, an excuse Paula rejected. She was extremely upset over his negligence.

The Phone Call

Married life was pretty much like unmarried life. Paula and I worked hard and partied harder. She graduated from nursing school and started a lucrative career in the medical field. The pawn shop had grown to the point where it took up two buildings. Money was no longer a concern for us. Everything was to my liking. Why can't things just stay the way they are?

I received a phone call from Bill (Keith's friend Bill, not throbbing asshole Bill). What he told me was like a kick to the stomach. Keith had AIDS. Apparently, he had been feeling ill for some time and couldn't figure out why. The doctor diagnosed him as HIV positive, but by that time, he had full blown AIDS and didn't have long to live. As I tearfully hung up the phone, the night before my wedding popped into my mind. I always felt like the last person to get the punchline, and this time, the joke was on me.

The dread of realization tied a knot in my chest so tight, I could barely breathe. *Why is this happening to me?* Deep down, I knew the answer to that question, but playing the victim lessens the distress. To make matters worse, I had no one to confide in. Talking to my parents was out of the question, and I definitely didn't want to tell Paula. I would have to go this one alone. I needed time for my fragmented thoughts to congeal. I needed to make some decisions. I needed to get high. I left work early and did just that.

Paula noticed the veil of somberness which enveloped me; she attributed it to the news of Keith's illness. For the next several days, I walked around in a fog, consumed by thoughts of the disease I contracted and my innocent wife whose life I had destroyed. My drug use escalated in a desperate attempt to blot out my fear, but it wouldn't go away. I stopped having sex with Paula, which she noticed as well. Eventually, I decided to get tested.

The test came back negative, but I wasn't in the clear yet. Because the exposure was recent, I had to be tested again in six months. I was instructed to avoid sexual contact of any kind, and inform all my partners of the situation. I didn't tell Paula. Not yet.

I was so wrapped up in my own selfishness, I hardly noticed one of my closest friends was dying. Since Paula was a registered nurse, she spent a lot of time with him. I, on the other hand, saw Keith only once while he was sick. She told him I was having a hard time accepting his illness, that I had not been the same since the news came out. But he knew the real reason.

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Keith died on February 26, 1993. At his funeral service, as Bill, Paula and I wept over his body, Bill stuck a joint in his shirt pocket. I thought, *If there's another dry spell, all I need is a shovel.*

What the fuck is wrong with me?

The second HIV test was negative. I have since been tested several times. All negative. If luck is an actual resource, I used quite a bit that time, and it was depleting fast. I never told Paula. And I never dug up Keith. I love and miss you.

The Zeppelins

My parents quit their day jobs to focus on the pawn shop. Instead of smatterings of Robert's displeasure with me, I heard it all day long. But he was unaware of my drug use and didn't have anything substantial to complain about. Not yet, anyway.

Paula discovered she was pregnant and due in October. She claims to remember the session which resulted in her pregnancy, something only a woman can sense. Sex always ended the same for me. After learning of her condition, she stopped drinking and using drugs. I, on the other hand, didn't have to

shoulder that burden. A chance encounter at work would send me down a path of despair I almost never escaped.

One of our regular customers was a woman named Kim. Her figure reminded me of Allison's, but with a larger frame. But her most noticeable feature was two of the largest mammary glands a human chest could accommodate. When she walked around a corner, it looked like a zeppelin race. As Kim browsed through the jewelry, she casually mentioned she sold weed. I got her number.

I purchased pot from her several times. On one visit, she asked, "You wanna' buy some Lortabs?"

I remembered taking them after my car accident, but, being in pain, had no recollection of their effect. I bought a handful, dropped them in my pocket and forgot about them.

At work the next morning, I found them. I swallowed two pills and went about my day. An hour later, I didn't fully understand what was happening. I felt great. I had energy. I was in a fantastic mood. The tedious tasks I was responsible for were suddenly effortless. When I finally associated the change in my attitude with the Lortabs, I knew I had discovered something amazing. I had found the perfect drug.

The Perfect Drug

by
Nine Inch Nails

I've got my head
But my head is unraveling
Can't keep control
Can't keep track of where it's traveling
I've got my heart
But my heart is no good
You're the only one that's understood

I come along
But I don't know where you're taking me
I shouldn't go
But you're itching, dragging, shaking me
Turn off the sun
Pull the stars from the sky
The more I give to you
The more I die

And I want you
And I want you
And I want you
And I want you

You are the perfect drug
You are the perfect drug
You are the perfect drug
You are the perfect drug

You make me hard
When I'm all soft inside
I see the truth
When I'm all stupid-eyed
The arrow goes
Straight through my heart
Without you
Everything just falls apart

My blood
Wants to say hello to you
My fear

Brett Douglas

Is gonna' get inside of you
My soul is so
Afraid to realize
How very little there is left of me

You are the perfect drug
You are the perfect drug
You are the perfect drug
You are the perfect drug

Take me with you..... Take me with you..... Take me with you.....

Without you
Without you, everything falls apart
Without you
It's not as much fun to pick up the pieces

The Construction Project

As Paula's stomach increased in size, I realized I didn't want to raise my child in Mayfair. Robert offered to sell us the vacant lot on Newton Drive. The remnants of the burnt structure had been removed, leaving the foundation. All I had to do was build a house on it. I had recently received a settlement from the car accident, so financing wasn't a problem if I built the house myself. But I knew *nothing* about construction.

I presented the idea to Paula, but she was dead against it, preferring to purchase a home from a realtor. I explained by building the house ourselves, we could get it for half the market value. I would use customers from the pawn shop who were in the construction business to do the work. She correctly pointed out I couldn't hang a picture properly, much less build a house. She absolutely refused to go along with the plan.

The construction project was an opportunity to demolish Paula and Robert's low opinion of me. I would not be outmaneuvered this time. I paid for blueprints, wrote a business plan, and made an agreement with a pawn shop customer, Jerry, who agreed to frame the house. After much persuasion, Paula reluctantly agreed.

Jerry and I decided to start the project the following Monday. I purchased \$8,000 worth of materials at Lowe's, which were to be delivered at 6:00 am. Sunday evening, I called Jerry. He told me he would be at the job site the next morning.

Brett Douglas

I arrived at the vacant lot at 5:30 am. The Lowe's truck dropped off the materials as scheduled, but Jerry was nowhere to be found. I called his phone but got no answer. By 8:00 am, the situation had not changed. I could hear Paula gleefully reminding me of her insightfulness. "You'll shoot your eye out, kid!" or some shit like that.

After a few calls, I got in touch with his wife. "Is Jerry there?" I asked.

"No, who tha' hell is this?"

"This is Brett. Jerry was supposed to start framing my house this morning."

"Who?" She sounded hungover.

"Brett. I need to speak to Jerry."

"He's not here."

"Well, I need to speak to him."

"About what?" She obviously wasn't listening. I felt like I was stuck in an Abbott and Costello routine.

"About the construction job he was supposed to start this morning. I have thousands of dollars' worth of materials and no framer," I replied, enunciating my words with a slight pause between each one.

"Oh yeah, he's in jail."

"JAIL?!" Blood rushed to my head. "I spoke to him last night." Silence on the end of the line. Apparently, this human cinder block needed more information. "I spoke to him around eight last night. Between then and six this morning he got arrested? All he had to do was go to sleep."

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"I'll have him call you when he gets out." I hung up before she asked for bail money.

I had an \$8,000 pile of lumber sitting on a vacant lot and didn't even own a hammer. If the materials sat there too long, someone could steal them. Also, Robert had found a tenant for the house we were currently living in. I only had two months to finish. With all these real problems, my only concern was Paula relishing in my failure. My dominant worry was her having this debacle to wield like a weapon the rest of our married life. I had a mental image of her lying on her deathbed, pulling me closer and uttering her final words, "Remember when you thought you could build a house? he he he..."

The motivating force in my life was not based on what was right or wrong, good or bad, or the correct course of action. I only wanted to keep my father and wife happy, goals I could never seem to accomplish. I would do anything to achieve this end. I no longer told them the truth or my honest opinion, but rather what I thought they wanted to hear. This coping mechanism was not a conscious decision, and I wasn't aware of it at the time. I was constantly defending myself, explaining my actions, and justifying my decisions, usually with some degree of dishonesty, a daily reminder of my insignificance regarding my own life.

After spending an hour trying to come up with a solution on my own, I was forced to do the unthinkable. I called Robert. "I have a problem."

"Let me guess. Jerry didn't show up."

"How did you know?"

"You always have to anticipate other people's fuck-ups."

That deserves repeating.

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies
12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding
13. Always anticipate other people's potential fuck-ups

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Robert suggested a carpenter named Kenny, who took on the project for considerably more money than Jerry had quoted, but I had no choice. Within days, the frame of our new home was being erected.

Jerry eventually called me. "I'm ready to start framing."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. I'm sorry. I ran into a problem."

"Well, too bad. I've already hired someone else."

"What do you mean? I was counting on that money," he yelled. This turd sandwich was actually angry with *me*.

"Let me explain something to you, buddy. My wife is about to have a child, and the house I am living in is about to be rented out to someone else. If I don't get this project finished, we'll be homeless when our child is born. If you're counting on money, show up next time."

I hung up before I heard his retort. I enjoyed my righteous indignation, even though it was hurled at a shiftless drunk. If only I had this brand of conviction with the people who mattered.

I found a new source of cocaine, which went well with the Lortabs I was eating every day. This stuff was very potent. I had to pace myself; otherwise I would be visited by the Darkness. I learned if I stood still with my eyes closed and mentally calmed myself, the Darkness would leave. Of course, I had to be alone when I did this; acting like a mannequin is odd behavior in a room full of people. The notion of stopping never occurred to me. Pacing my cocaine intake seldom worked either.

Brett Douglas

Each stage of the construction project required a different building permit. If a homeowner pulled his own, they received a considerable discount, the only requirement being they were the person doing the work. To save money, I performed any work I was capable of doing myself, which wasn't much. For everything else, I pulled the permits and then hired someone else to do it. The frame, trusses, roof, doors and windows were installed in this manner. The project was going like clockwork until I got to the electrical wiring.

I hired Ellard, a customer at the pawn shop, to do the work. He was a veteran of the Korean War and a retired electrician, who claimed to have forty years' experience in the business. He also claimed to know the current electrical codes like the back of his hand. We agreed on a price, and I pulled the permit that afternoon.

On the morning he was scheduled to start, I purchased an 8-ball and arrived at the project site early. Although I knew it was a bad idea, I snorted a huge line of coke before I exited the car. As I stood amongst the unfinished walls of the house waiting for Ellard, Dick, the electrical inspector, pulled up, which was unusual because the inspectors normally didn't come by until after the work was completed. As he approached the house, I felt the Darkness falling over me, which inhibited my ability to bullshit my way through this situation.

"So, you're wiring this house yourself, huh?" Dick inquired as he looked at the house frame.

"Yes," I quietly replied. My body was throbbing with numbness; I was only able to give one-word answers.

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He fired several technical questions at me, quickly surmising I didn't have the knowledge required to do the work. "I know what's going on here."

"Okay." My brevity was due to me trying not to die during this excruciating conversation.

"Oh yeah, you think you're the only one that's tried to pull this scam?"

"No." I wasn't paying attention.

"I usually get a bottle of scotch or something for approving a job like this."

"Okay." I was about to pass out.

"I'll be seeing you in a few days." Dick left.

The Darkness started to subside. When Ellard arrived, I informed him of the conversation I had with the inspector and told him to get the work done as fast as possible.

I was relieved when, a few days later, he was finished. I called Dick to schedule an inspection. The next day, I got a phone call. "This is Tom, the chief electrical inspector. We have a problem. Am I to understand you did this work yourself?"

"Yes, I did," I lied.

"Well, can you meet me at the site?"

"Certainly," I answered with all the confidence I could muster.

I met Tom at the framed house, and basically, had my ass handed to me. The last time Ellard looked at the electrical codes was ten years prior. But I had to take the blame for his incompetence. After reciting a lengthy list of

errors, Tom told me to strip all the wiring out of the house and hire a licensed electrician. Upon his departure, I notified Ellard of the recent turn of events.

“That’s bullshit. I know the electrical codes,” he blustered.

“Well, Tom pointed out numerous examples of work based on old codes.”

“Fuck that. Give me one example.”

“The conduit over the power box outside.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it,” I yelled. “The chief electrical inspector told me to remove it. That’s what’s fucking wrong with it.”

“Well, that’s bullshit.”

“Ellard, what am I supposed to do? This man can hold up this entire project, and I only have a month before my wife and I end up homeless.”

I paid him for his time, and that was the end of it.

At least, that’s what I thought.

The next day, I decided to visit Tom at his office. I needed to smooth things over and let him know I was hiring a licensed contractor. Upon exiting the elevator, I heard loud voices from the back of the office. At first, I ignored it, until I realized one of them was Ellard’s. I ran to the back where Tom’s cubicle was located and saw them screaming at each other.

“You pussies in Vietnam would cry to your mamas if you fought in Korea like we did,” Ellard yelled.

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“My war was five times longer than yours. Fuck Korea,” Tom boisterously replied.

“Fuck you, you low-life motherfucker!”

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing; two grown men arguing about whose war was better, or worse. I wasn’t clear on that point. I grabbed Ellard by the arm and dragged him over to the elevator. “Why the hell are you here?” I demanded.

“Those sum bitches tellin’ me I don’t know what I’m doing—”

“You’re not supposed to have done the work. I paid you already. These inspectors can stop my project dead in its tracks,” I yelled at him as quietly as I could.

“That motherfucker trying to get a bribe from you, then making you rip out all my—”

“Wait a minute. What bribe?”

“The bottle of liquor that asshole asked you for.”

“Oh,” I said. I had forgotten about that. “Look. Promise me you won’t come back here. I have to get this project done. I’m running out of time.”

“Okay.” He descended in the elevator, grumbling to himself. I apologized to Tom for Ellard’s outburst, and that was the end of it.

At least, that’s what I thought.

The next day, I got a phone call. "Hi, my name's Prescott. I'm with the internal affairs department of the City of Pensacola. I want to discuss a recent event that occurred with one of our inspectors."

My heart sank. Ellard went to Tom's office to defend his honor and not-up-to-code work, and the inspectors were about to shut my entire project down. My face went flush with anger.

"I had nothing to do with that idiot making a scene in your office yesterday," I said.

"I'm not referring to that. I would like some information on the bribe Dick solicited from you. This is a very serious charge which could lead to jail time."

I paused a few seconds. "If I cooperate, his fellow inspectors will drag this project out for months. I don't have that kind of time."

"I can assure you, no retribution will be enacted upon you."

I realized I had Dick by the beanbag. I could squeeze tight and bring him to his knees or simply let go. He was an asshole and had the personality of an abscessed tooth. But, I lied about doing the work and, the day we spoke, was trying not to die during our one-sided conversation. I decided to let go of his beanbag. "He made a joke. I took it as a joke. It may have been a bad joke, but neither one of us took it seriously."

I could hear the disappointment in Prescott's voice. I surmised he didn't care for Dick and saw an opportunity to rid the office of him. The next time I saw Dick, he treated me like royalty. He owed his career and freedom to

me. I usually had to pay good money to have my ass tongued that deep. I hired a licensed electrical contractor, and that was the end of it.

That really was the end of it.

The Maternity Store

As Paula and I browsed through a maternity store looking for clothes that would fit her pregnant figure, she found a book of names. "Let's buy this. It'll help us name our son."

I looked at the price tag. "Ten bucks? I'm not spending that to pick a single name. We're having a child, not a litter."

I opened the book and stuck my finger on a random page. It rested on the name...

Devin

Twice, I have positively impacted the world, and one of those is my son, Devin. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, he has complimented me beyond what I deserve. Although he's several inches taller, he looks, sounds, and behaves like me, at least the commendable behavior.

Always smiling and happy, Devin was a pleasant child. As an infant, he slept through the night without shedding a tear. In fact, he hardly ever cried, and when he did, his needs were straightforward: titty or diaper change.

As he got older, I saw my mischievous nature in him. For example, I laid a blanket down in our backyard to get some sun. Next to me was a plastic tumbler of iced tea. He came up to me and, in his sweet, three-year-old voice, asked, "Daddy, can I have a drink?"

"Sure."

Devin threw the tea in my face. I heard him giggle as he ran away. I could not deny this child.

One day, Devin's daycare called while I was at work. The lady on the phone told me he was misbehaving, and I had to come pick him up early. I was puzzled because disruptive behavior was not characteristic of him. Nicky's mom, Vicky, worked at the daycare and met me at the door. In case you forgot, she didn't like me when I was young and was especially perturbed that *my* son was giving her a hard time.

"Devin has been very disrespectful today, and you need to teach him some manners."

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“Oh really? What did he do?” I asked, trying not to smile.

“He was calling everyone in class a ‘butthead,’ and I told him to stop saying that word. So, he said, ‘Okay, butthead.’” Although Vicky was serious, I struggled not to laugh.

If any other child had done that, she probably wouldn’t have thought twice about it. But since it was my child, he had to go home early. Devin’s behavior reaffirmed Vicky’s opinion of me. I weakly scolded him, and then took him for ice cream to celebrate.

Devin has seen me at my best and worst. But my worst is worse than most. If my addiction had a silver lining, it was Devin’s reaction when he discovered his longtime girlfriend was dabbling in drugs; he broke up with her, refusing to have anything to do with that lifestyle after watching what it did to me. Most parents claim they would take a bullet for their child. I feel like I did.

Devin also shares my love of music, but he took his passion a step further. He is an accomplished drummer, guitar player, and songwriter. I never tire of watching him perform and witnessing the joy he gets from doing something he loves. I cannot express how proud I am to have Devin as my son, and what an incredible young man he turned out to be. Whether it’s because of me or in spite of me.

Part to Play

by

My Son, Devin

She was standing by the lake
Eyes full of pain and her legs they quaked
But I really liked the way she smiled
Won't you sit here for a while
And let the earth rotate
And we can pick a part to play

She lived upstairs in a loft
Neil Young played somewhere far off
Through the window, the breeze bled through the day
We laid on her velvet bed
Didn't feel we had to say
But I was thinking about a part I used to play

I didn't know there was a pain
Like losing your twin in the rain
I laughed when my friends told me I was finally free
It didn't feel that way to me
But now it's any time and any place
We pick our part to play

She ain't around and it ain't that bad
For a while, you were just sad and mad
You locked an old script in the shed to circumvent the pain
But still, you hear their name
Through the circling twist of fate
And you're looking for a part to play
Just looking for a part to play

The Rope

Despite the challenges, I completed the construction project. The first evening in our new home, I laid on the shag carpet in the living room and relished my success. I had done what Paula and Robert said I couldn't and was proud of my accomplishment, but for the wrong reason. The line between feeling pride and being prideful is razor thin.

Devin's arrival home from the hospital marked the beginning of a continuous struggle between my wife and father. Robert voiced his concern over Fuzzy living in the same house with our infant son. His reasoning was if the cat jumped into the bassinet, Devin could inadvertently be asphyxiated. Robert demanded I get rid of the cat.

When I told Paula of his concern, she rejected it in her usual vocal manner. She thought his request was ridiculous. Every day, Robert asked if I had disposed of the cat, and every evening, Paula griped about his intrusion in our lives. My father told me to be a man and get rid of the animal, while my wife told me to be a man and stand up to my father. Since when was my manhood in question? I *did* impregnate Paula.

Paula and Robert weren't brave enough to face each other. Instead, they used me as a conduit to express their frustration. No matter what decision I made, I would upset someone I loved. Sound familiar? The entire time this battle was raging, I was thinking, *Why don't both of you just FUCK OFF!*

If this episode were an isolated incident, it wouldn't be worth mentioning. But the next ten years of my life became an endless tug-of-war

between Paula and Robert, and I was the rope. And as we all know, the rope assumes the pressure but never wins the game.

As Devin got older, he favored his left hand, which is believed to indicate an artistic mind. I don't really buy that idea. Life is never that cut-and-dry. Robert insisted we force him to use his right hand, being that most things in life favor right-handed people. On cue, Paula railed against the idea.

Every day presented a new crisis they held opposing views on, and Robert wasn't always the unreasonable one. As I arrived home from work one evening, I noticed a "For Sale" sign in our yard. Incensed, I barged through the front door, hoping to hear an explanation other than the obvious one. "What the hell is that in our front yard?"

"I just wanted to find out what we could get for this house," Paula explained.

"You can go to Zillow.com and get that information."

"I was just curious."

"I hope that's all it is. I busted my ass building this place. There's no way we're selling a house that's paid for."

Two days later, Paula informed me she had an offer and wanted to buy a larger home. We viciously argued about the sale, but all attempts to dissuade her failed. To keep the peace, I eventually went along with it. I lost the will to fight.

Robert was upset with me for allowing her to sell our home. I acted equally appalled but was only telling him what he wanted to hear. I understood Paula's motivation. I disregarded her wishes by building the house. Now, she

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was ignoring mine. I resigned myself to the inevitable outcome; someone I cared about was going to be unhappy with me.

Unexpectedly, Robert made a generous offer. He had recently acquired his deceased uncle's home, which sat on two acres of land adjacent to an apartment complex. He offered to sell the property to us for the sale price of our current home, predicting the owners of the apartments next door would eventually buy it from us. I knew Robert's predictions were amazingly accurate. Our next home could be purchased without a bank note.

Of course, Paula refused to even consider the idea. She claimed the house wasn't nice enough for her to live in, although we would be there temporarily. Since both our names were on the deed to our current home, I couldn't run a game around her this time. I reluctantly declined the offer. One year later, Robert sold the land to the apartment complex for a handsome profit, a painful reminder of how I mishandled the situation.

To an outside observer, my life appeared beautiful and structured, much like a wedding cake. But the whisk never gets respect. I was a tool manipulated by my wife and father to express their resentments. The stress was debilitating. On numerous occasions, I pulled my car off the road, punched the steering wheel, and screamed in anger over the never-ending feud I was unwillingly trapped in. To be clear, Paula and Robert were not bad people. Robert was generous and did what he thought was best for his family. Paula was an educated, hard-working woman who did what she thought was best for her family. But they both failed to recognize a few relevant points. I made the

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pawn shop profitable, making my parents wealthy. I also built our house, providing my family a place to live debt-free. I felt like an island surrounded by tsunamis.

But I did have someone on my side who never let me down and always made me happy. Lortabs. I took at least forty every day. For the first time in fifteen years, I no longer needed marijuana. But I had not yet discovered the down-side to my coping mechanism.

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies
12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding
13. Always anticipate other people's potential fuck-ups
14. There is no such thing as a "Free Lunch"

The Ice Cream

One night, I noticed an unfamiliar brand of ice cream in the freezer. The label indicated it contained aspartame instead of sugar and Olestra instead of fat. I thought it would taste like Styrofoam but was delighted to find it was delicious. I ate the entire carton. I had finally discovered a “Free Lunch,” a treat which tasted good but was not fattening, no matter how much I consumed. In other words, an indulgence with no consequences.

At 2:00 am, I was awakened by tremendous stomach cramps and spent an hour on the toilet with diarrhea. I didn’t think much of it.

The following evening, I ate another carton of the ice cream and was once again awakened by cramps and diarrhea. I sensed a pattern was developing. On the third evening, I examined the carton. On the label was a warning, “May have laxative effect.”

There is no such thing as a “Free Lunch.”

The Demon

After two years of taking Lortabs every day, I ran out on a Saturday and wouldn't be able to get any until Monday. No big deal. At least, that's what I thought. Sunday evening, we planned to meet our family at a restaurant to celebrate Paula's birthday. But I didn't feel well. This feeling wasn't like the Darkness. It was an unrelenting anxiety, a physical and mental pain I had never experienced before. I was extremely fatigued. All I wanted to do was lie in bed. But when I did, I couldn't sleep. My arms and legs relentlessly twitched. My body toggled between hot flashes and extreme chills, sometimes within minutes. Sweat poured from my skin, drenching my shirt in moisture. I could *literally* wring it out like a dish rag.

Paula informed me what I was experiencing was withdrawal from the Lortabs and was upset at the timing of my illness. I was catatonic at the restaurant; everyone at the table knew I didn't want to be there. I ruined her birthday celebration, and she had every right to be pissed. Unfortunately, this event would be the first of many outings spoiled by the Demon, the name I assigned to this painful feeling. People give names to things they encounter regularly. As with the Darkness, the fact I gave it a name should have been a warning.

Paula loved to go on vacations, especially cruises. But going out of town always posed a problem for me. I tried to bring enough pain medicine to last the duration of the trip, but no amount would have been enough. Moderation was always problematic. I allowed the Demon to ruin numerous family events.

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When I did cocaine, the Darkness was a possibility. But when I took Lortabs, the Demon was a certainty. With this scenario in mind, most people would have stopped taking the pills. But my answer was to never run out, no matter what the cost. I thought I had found the perfect drug when in fact, the drug had found the perfect victim.

Again, there is no such thing as a "Free Lunch."

Thus began the struggle which would define the rest of my life, the unwinnable competition to outrace the speed of pain.

The Speed of Pain

by
Marilyn Manson

We slit our throats
Like we were flowers
And our milk has been
Devoured

When you want it
Goes away too fast
Times you hate it
Always seems to last
Just remember
When you think you're free
The crack inside your fucking heart is me

I wanna outrace the speed of pain
For another day

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I wanna outrace the speed of pain
For another day

I wish I could sleep
But I can't lay on my back
Because there's a knife
For every day that I've known you

When you want it
Goes away too fast
Times you hate it
Always seems to last
Just remember
When you think you're free
The crack inside your fucking heart is me

I wanna outrace the speed of pain
For another day
I wanna outrace the speed of pain
For another day

Lie to me, cry to me, give to me, I would
Lie with me, die with me, give to me, I would

Keep all your secrets wrapped in dead hair, always
Keep all your secrets wrapped in dead hair, always

Hope that we die holding hands, always
Hope that we die holding hands, always

The Pregnancy Test

Paula expressed her desire to have another baby, an idea I rejected. We already had a child, a rather pleasant one at that. Why would we want another? I should have known she had already made the decision, and the discussion was a pointless formality.

Soon after, I came home from work and found my in-laws' cars parked in front. As I walked through the door, Paula's sister greeted me with a stick pregnancy test in her hand and gleefully blurted out, "Paula's pregnant!"

Her family scrutinized my reaction. I played it cool but was truly annoyed. Once again, I had been out-maneuvered. What should have been a private moment between my wife and me was purposely displayed in front of others to temper my response. I felt like a caged animal at the zoo being gawked at by strangers.

Of course, as unthinkable as another child was at the time, my existence is unimaginable without the crown jewel of my life, my daughter...

Jordan

The second positive impact I've had on the world is my daughter, Jordan. While Devin was easy-going and pleasant, she was the opposite: loud, ornery, and demanding. I often joked if she had been born first, I would have had my vasectomy immediately afterward. She had wispy blond hair which looked like a Jim Henson puppet, piercing blue eyes, and an adorable lisp, which added to her cuteness. But as loveable as she appeared, whenever circumstances deviated from her preference, she was not at all shy about expressing her displeasure.

As an infant, Jordan screamed and cried all night. She wailed impatiently in her highchair waiting to be fed. And when Paula placed the plate in front of her, Jordan stopped crying, looked her mother dead in the eyes, and threw the plate on the floor. Paula defiantly replaced the food, only to have Jordan throw it on the floor again.

Jordan's disposition turned out to be her most endearing quality. She developed a delightful ability to state the obvious in the funniest way possible. When she was three-years-old, I decided her brother, who was six, and his cousin, Colby, had reached an age where they should take their bath separate from her. When I informed Jordan of my decision, she protested, "But Dad, I've already seen their wieners!"

That story always makes me laugh, although she hates it and may never speak to me again for writing about it.

I never knew what was going to come out of Jordan's mouth. While we ate at Burger King, she picked a sesame seed off the bun and said, "Dad, if I plant this, will I grow a hamburger tree?"

Despite her disposition during her youth, Jordan blossomed into a beautiful and intelligent young woman. Her interests parallel my own: dice-driven fantasy games, comic book conventions, and bizarre movies. She rejects console video games, like Xbox and PlayStation, for PC games, agreeing with me that console games are for faggots. That's not the pejorative for homosexuals, but the euphemism for intellectually lazy people. You know, faggots. Perhaps the greatest compliment I've ever been given was when my daughter told me her boyfriend, Michael, reminded her of me. Jordan is the pride of my existence and one of the most decent human beings I know. Whether because of me or in spite of me.

Norm

I met all my drug dealers through the pawn shop. But Norm was the one I used the most. At first, he was a just another customer, until I overheard him mention Methadone. I had heard of the drug but never tried it. I arranged to meet him after work. Standing in his kitchen, he handed me a plastic bottle filled with a fluorescent orange liquid. "This stuff is designed for hardcore drug addicts," he said. "There's 40mg in this bottle but only take five. You'll be high for three days. Take any more than that, you'll be sick as hell."

When I got home, I measured out 5mg and swallowed it. The amount was barely enough to wet my tongue, so I drank the entire bottle. As predicted, I was violently sick for the next three days. I couldn't even go to work. Despite the nausea and vomiting, I had a great buzz.

My reasoning was if a little is good, then a lot more must be a lot better, despite the negative consequences. The thought process of a drug addict may seem perplexing to someone who has never had such a problem. Robert is one of those people. He quit smoking cigarettes during the 70's when the price increased to forty cents a pack. Even though he enjoyed drinking, he quit when it started to affect his health. Addict reasoning seems to run contrary to the most basic of instincts: survival. So, I will now attempt to explain...

Addict Thinking

1) More Is Better – When you were a child, did you ever gain access to the cookie jar and take one cookie? Of course not. You grabbed as many as your little hands could hold. My drug of choice was MORE. No matter how much dope I had, it was never enough.

2) The Only Time That Matters Is NOW – On the series *The Sopranos*, Silvio said, “You’re only as good as your next envelope.” In other words, no matter how much money you gave Tony Soprano in the past, all that mattered was the current payment. Addict thinking is similar. Regardless of how high I got yesterday or how much I spent, all that mattered was *today’s* fix. The only time that’s important is *now*.

3) Consequences Are Not Real – Has anyone ever purchased a pack of cigarettes, read the warning label, which said something like, “Cigarettes killed the dinosaurs,” and never smoked again? I seriously doubt it. The hard reality of getting high will always eclipse the ether-like, future repercussions of an addict’s actions. It’s as if tomorrow will never arrive.

4) Drugs Trump Everything – Paula’s father had a heart attack, requiring open heart surgery. As he rested in the recovery room, Paula’s mom said, “He’s hooked up to a morphine drip.”

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My first thought was, *Lucky bastard. I wish I could have a heart attack.* Instead of being happy for my father-in-law's successful operation, I was jealous of his pain medication. Drugs trump everything.

Whenever a friend died of a drug overdose, my first thought was, *I wish I could get some of that shit.* Give me enough to kill me then back it off a little.

5) Lazy Adrenaline Junkies – Ultimately, a drug addict is a lazy adrenaline junky. I desire the thrill that comes from skydiving; I just don't want to leave my couch. Drugs give me the best of both worlds. I can get an exhilarating rush while binge watching *Bob's Burgers*.

Anyway, back to the story.

I complained to Norm about the Methadone making me ill. He laughed and told me he would do me a favor, which, in hindsight, wasn't beneficial. He sold me a tan pill called OxyContin, showed me how to cook it in a spoon and instructed me on how to shoot it into my vein without leaving a bruise.

I stopped taking Lortabs. Graduating to intravenous pain medicine is much like purchasing your first high-definition television.

You'll *never* go back to black and white.

The Waterbed

I went home and showed Paula what I had learned from Norm. Since she was a nurse, her skill with a needle proved helpful. She didn't tell me this wasn't the first time she had shot up.

Two methods exist for doing drugs using a hypodermic needle:

- 1) IV (Intravenous) – injecting drugs directly into the bloodstream
- 2) IM (Intramuscular) – injecting drugs directly into a muscle

In my drug-riddled mind, I determined that shooting OxyContin IM was healthier than doing it IV. The rush was not as intense, but it lasted longer. Thus, five times a day, I injected a full 1cc syringe into my upper-arm muscle. After several months, my arms became swollen, misshapen, and had the squishy consistency of a waterbed. I knew if I didn't drain the fluid from my muscles, I ran the risk of a nasty infection.

I decided to cut a two-inch vertical gash in my arm with a razor blade to allow the liquid to drain, but quickly discovered a problem with my idea. Cutting into my muscle that deep hurt like a motherfucker. I howled in pain as I pressed the blade into my skin. Pink, viscous fluid poured from the wound, causing a small puddle to collect on the floor. I started feeling nauseous at the sight of it. But my left arm was no longer a waterbed.

For my right arm, I decided to try a different approach. I stuck the needle of an empty syringe into the muscle and pulled the plunger out. Then, I

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emptied the full syringe into the sink. I had to perform this extraction about thirty times before all the fluid had been removed. Paula walked into the bathroom while I was doing this. “Oh my God! What the hell are you doing?”

Her shocked reaction made me realize my actions were not normal. Addiction makes the most bizarre behavior seem ordinary. I thought everyone did drugs and had the same problems I had. I was incapable of differentiating the true from the false.

The Lost Child

I learned Paula was stealing potent narcotics from the hospital she worked at. Surely no one had ever done that before. With Norm selling us dope and the hospital providing it for free, I didn't see the Demon for quite a while. But the Demon wasn't the only consequence of my behavior.

I decided to celebrate Paula's 24th birthday by renting a limousine for the evening and inviting several friends. I had recently discovered Roxicodone, a small, blue tablet which was much more potent than OxyContin. In preparation for the trip, I purchased ten Roxicodone pills, ten hits of ecstasy, an eight-ball of cocaine, several bottles of liquor, and a box of cigars. I reduced the pills to liquid form and put the solution in an empty saline vial, providing an easy method of extraction. That night, Paula and I injected all the pain medicine,

took most of the ecstasy, and snorted half of the eight-ball. But we did share the cigars with our guests.

As the sun rose and the limo departed, Paula and I were as intoxicated as two people could be without vital organs shutting down. We picked up Devin, who was three years old, from my parents' house and rushed home before we passed out. I left him in his room playing with his toys and laid next to Paula. We both fell asleep.

Late afternoon was ending when I woke up. The house was silent, which was odd because Devin's playful chatter was usually audible to some degree. I looked in his room, under his bed, and in his closet. No Devin. I started calling his name. I looked in both bathrooms. No Devin. My calls got louder. I looked in the living room. No Devin. My voice quivered as my concern turned to dread. I didn't know where my child was. I looked in the kitchen and the garage. No Devin. My calls turned into frantic screams. Paula ran from the bedroom.

"I can't find Devin!" I yelled.

"What? Oh, my God! Devin! Devin!"

We searched each room again with a panicked sense of urgency, but our son was not in the house. "Call 911. I'll drive around the neighborhood," I bellowed through my tears.

I drove around the block, frenziedly looking for my little towheaded boy. I asked the people mingling around outside if they had seen him, but none of them had. My mind raced. *How did I let this happen?* Deep in my gut, I knew the answer to that question.

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Moments like this are when the most hardcore atheists make deals with God. For people like me, desperation always precedes prayer. I asked God for my son's return, promising I would stop doing drugs if He would answer my plea. But Devin was not in the neighborhood.

I bolted back into our driveway and found Paula and Devin standing on the front porch. Earlier that afternoon, he had crawled under his desk, pulled a blanket over himself, and fell asleep. Relieved, I gave him a big hug. God answered my prayer, but I quickly forgot my part of the bargain.

The Blue Wads

Instead of cleaning up my act, my drug use continued. I developed a habit of shooting up in convenience store restrooms. So as to not arouse suspicion, I devised an ingenious method of tracking how often I used each location for my illicit purpose. Shooting Roxicodone leaves a damp piece of blue cotton in the spoon, which I flicked onto the ceiling. By counting the blue wads, I knew how often I'd been there. My personal record was fifty-eight. Eventually, I didn't care how many times I visited each bathroom. I just got a kick out of how many pieces of cotton I could stick to one ceiling.

The Pliers

Our pawn shop became the largest and most versatile one in Pensacola. Being the only nerd in the business, I had the used computer market cornered. I even started a computer repair service in the corner of the store, something no other shop did at the time. We bought Rolex watches, diamonds, jewelry, sound equipment, coins, sports collectibles, vintage guitars, and anything else our competitors turned down. We were the first shop in town to utilize a computer-based ticketing system. I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in accounting, which helped with the bookkeeping. We set the standard our competition strived to reach. But I also became proficient at skimming cash to support my drug habit. The shop was so profitable, no one noticed the shortages. I shot dope five times a day but managed to hide it from everyone.

The pawn business is unlike any other. The reality shows on television, like *Pawn Stars*, are complete bullshit. No crackheads or dope fiends for customers? Yeah, right! Once, a man asked to pawn his prosthetic leg. I wanted to take it just to have one hanging on our wall. But I imagined him hopping out of the store, so I turned him down. As hard as this may be to believe, I have standards. Not very high standards, but they're there.

Once, a gentleman came into the shop and asked Mom, "Do you buy dental gold?"

"We sure do."

"Do you sell pliers?"

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“Uh... they’re over there,” she answered, hoping this situation wasn’t going where she knew it was.

The man walked to the pliers’ bin, grabbed a pair, and pulled a tooth out of his head. Then, he put the pliers back where he found them and tossed the tooth, with a gold filling, on the counter. I reached for it, but Mom stopped me. “I’m sorry you pulled your tooth for no reason,” she said, “but get that God damned thing off my counter and get the hell out of my store.”

The man collected his tooth and headed for the door. I protested, “Mom, it’s gold.”

“I don’t give God damn what it’s made of. You’re not gonna’ touch anything that came out of that low-rent motherfucker’s mouth.”

“I have rubbing alcohol.”

“Don’t care!”

The pawn shop was so lucrative, losing money on a transaction was almost impossible, even when we weren’t paying attention. A customer, standing next to a stack of four small tires, asked Robert, “What cha’ want for these?”

“Thirty.”

The customer examined them for a moment and said, “I’ll give you fifteen a piece.”

So, Robert collected \$60 for the \$30 stack of tires. But the funny part of the story was the Freudian slip he blurted out afterward.

“Thank you,” the customer said after paying him.

“No problem. Glad I could do that to ya’... uh... I mean for ya’”

Robert always had a knack for sticking his foot in his mouth so deep, it would hang out his ass. When the shop first opened, an attractive young lady approached the door.

“Man, check out the tits on her,” Robert moaned.

“That’s my daughter,” Bill indignantly replied.

Thirty minutes later, another attractive young lady approached the front door. “Good God, what a rack,” Robert exclaimed.

“Dad, that’s my girlfriend,” I said.

When the third attractive young lady approached the door, Robert asked, “Does anyone know her before I comment on her tits?”

The Delusion

I was siphoning \$10,000 a month from the shop to support my drug habit. Any other business wouldn’t have survived my theft. Even though the monetary shortages weren’t noticed, my skill at masking my behavior started to slip. Denial is an essential tool in a drug addict’s arsenal. The capacity to lie to myself was how I kept the fear of exposure at bay. I believed no one noticed I was high all the time. I didn’t think the amount of dope I was shooting altered my behavior in any way. I didn’t think anyone noticed I went to the bathroom five times a day for thirty minutes at a time and nodded off in front of customers.

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I existed in a perpetual state of delusion and couldn't see how strange my actions were. But other people did.

And now it's time for the first (and last) installment of...

The Top Quotes from Donald Rumsfeld

We're counting down the top three quotes from Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense during the George W. Bush administration.

At number 3...

"Dick Cheney almost shot me in the face."

Coming in at number 2...

"Going to war without France is like going duck hunting without your accordion."

And the number 1 quote from Donald Rumsfeld is...

"We have the known knowns, the things we know we know; the known unknowns, the things we know we don't know; and the unknown unknowns, the things we don't know we don't know."

The effect my drug use was having on my life was an unknown unknown. In other words, I didn't know how unaware I was as to how deeply drugs were affecting me. In my mind, life was great, and I was taking care of my responsibilities. Drugs were my reward for working hard and being successful. I didn't know that I didn't know how much of a chore life had become, how I had to feign interest in people, how devoid of real emotions I was, and how everyone and everything was an obstacle to my only true interest: getting high. I was clueless to my cluelessness.

The first glimpse of my "unknown unknown" came at someone else's expense.

The Prescription

Paula and I went out of town to see a concert with some friends. She was detached, distant, and withdrawn the entire weekend. Upon our return to Pensacola, I learned the reason for her subdued behavior. She had been writing her own prescriptions for pain medicine, and her deception was discovered by the hospital the day before we left. The impending loss of her nursing license was hanging over her during the trip. Fortunately, Paula's employer gave her a second chance. She was sent to a three-month program at COPAC, a drug treatment facility near Jackson, Mississippi. She made me promise I wouldn't do drugs while she was gone and reluctantly left our two children in my care.

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I was determined not to violate Paula's trust. Since drugs were not an option, I reasoned that drinking alcohol would be acceptable. Every evening, I poured a drink, sat at the computer and did bookkeeping for the shop. As the amount I drank each night started to increase, I kept waking up to completed work I had no recollection of doing. Then one night, I woke up standing in a bar with my children at home unattended. I couldn't remember when I left the house or how I got there. That incident scared me, so I stopped drinking and started shooting dope again.

When Paula returned, she wasn't the same person who went to rehab three months prior. She was sober and insisted on living a clean life. That was fine for her. I wasn't the one who got in trouble; why should I have to suffer through a miserable, sober life? Drugs were the only thing that seemed to work for me. Without them, how would I get through the day? What would I have to look forward to? How would I ever enjoy anything? Drugs were the answer to all life's questions. I couldn't fathom the notion of living sober. I didn't know that I didn't know drugs were actually the problem, and I had just been introduced to the solution.

The Ballet

COPAC transformed the bitter, needy, and controlling woman I married into a happy, energetic, and loving person I hardly recognized. How often does a partner actually *improve* in a relationship? If only I would have noticed.

Since Paula no longer condoned drug use, I had to hide my habit from her. She started attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. I didn't understand or care why she went. While she was gone, I could shoot dope without concern, if only for a short time. I never considered being honest with her. Since I hid my addiction from everyone else, or so I thought, deceiving Paula shouldn't have been a problem. I didn't know that I didn't know I was only fooling myself.

I kept my "works" in a black, leather pouch. By "works" I mean a spoon, needles, cotton, and pills. It was always on me or near me. Keeping that pouch hidden was of paramount importance. On several occasions, Paula found it and threw away its contents. She finally disposed of the pouch itself. I started stashing my "works" in the seams of my pants, inside my shoes, and other unusual places.

Paula scrutinized my every move. When I was high, I was in an exceptionally good mood. So much so, I didn't behave normally, and she noticed it. I was too helpful around the house, overly playful with the children, and disingenuously attentive to her. A drug-induced happiness is a form of dishonesty. Much like watering a plastic houseplant and hoping it will exhibit

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some sign of life, my elation was a synthetic act. Of course, I couldn't understand how I could be *too* happy. My response to Paula's complaints was something like, "You're bitchin' because I'm in a good mood? Would you rather me treat you like shit?" In time, I would come to understand exactly what she was complaining about.

Despite my crazy behavior, Paula was happier than I had ever seen her. If she would only leave me the hell alone, I could be equally as happy shooting pills. I decided to temper my mood when I was around her, deliberately acting distant or upset. This charade was stressful and tiresome but, in my mind, worth the effort. My artificial demeanor worked for a while, but Paula's inquisitiveness wouldn't be satisfied that easily.

She soon discovered a new way to tell if I was high, one that was much harder to disguise. Whenever I injected pain medicine, my pupils would constrict. All she had to do was look at my eyes. And every time she caught my attempted deception, her response was always the same, "Your pupils look like two piss holes in the snow."

Whatever the fuck that meant, I heard it a lot. Again, being a good husband was not an option. My answer to this new challenge was a comical, or tragic, ballet I performed every night. I simply wouldn't look Paula in the eyes. This Kabuki Theater may not sound difficult, but it was quite exhausting.

First, so as to not arouse suspicion, I had to alter my mood. Next, when Paula asked me a question, I had to be preoccupied with something, so I didn't have to look directly at her when I answered. I would play with the children, fiddle with my phone, or drop something and pick it up. When we ate dinner, I

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insisted on eating in front of the TV so we wouldn't be facing each other. When she turned to talk to me, I would face forward. When I observed through my peripheral vision she was looking at the television, I turned to answer her.

I knew from experimentation my pupils would return to normal size after six hours. Therefore, I would shoot up at work around 2 pm and wait until after dinner for the next one. I made sure Paula looked at my normal pupils then went into the bathroom to get high. The wait was excruciating.

This evening routine became tedious, so I started coming home later in the evening. Every day, I lied to Paula about being high, the amount of money I was spending, and where I was after work. A distance formed between us. She was a different person but married to the same man she met at Applebee's years before. We developed our own separate lives and spent little time together. She avoided me to focus on her career and sobriety. I avoided her so I could do whatever I wanted.

I could have told Paula, "Look. I'm getting high. Deal with it." She would have had more respect for me with that approach. I was making so much money, she probably wouldn't have said another thing about it. But honesty was a foreign word to me. Of course, I could have stopped shooting dope, but I never considered that option in the least.

The Comic Book Salesman

Paula asked if I would attend an AA meeting with her. At first, I respectfully declined. But I knew from experience if she asked for something, the decision was already made. After some consistent prodding, I begrudgingly agreed to go. I went for one reason: to shut her ass up about the idea.

The meeting was at a church near downtown Pensacola and was attended by eight other people, most of whom probably remembered the Civil War. I looked at those old farts and thought, *What the fuck am I doing here?*

Hanging behind the person who was leading the meeting was a poster titled, "The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous." As the chairperson rambled on, I read the steps.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step one was no problem. I didn't like alcohol, so again, why the fuck am I here?

2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step two reeked of God. I didn't like where this was headed.

Brett Douglas

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

I knew it! This is a bunch of God bullshit. Paula has joined some religious cult, and these fossils are going to try to ram Jesus up my ass. Well, these petrified Bible freaks have met their match. I didn't bother reading the rest of the steps.

Everyone in the room took turns speaking, but I had nothing to say. Although no one mentioned Jesus, I knew AA wasn't for me. After the meeting, a fat, bearded, comic book salesman walked up to me, poked his sausage finger into my chest and said, "You need to get a sponsor, and you need to work the steps, and..."

While he spoke, I looked at him and thought, *And you need to suck my cock!* He might as well have been speaking Klingon because I had no idea what he was talking about, nor did I care. I just wanted out of that room so I could get high.

On the drive home, Paula asked, "So, did you like it?"

"Yes," I said. But I was thinking, *Fuck AA! That'll be the last God damn meeting I ever attend!* Fortunately, that thought was quite inaccurate.

The Intervention

In my mind, life was grand. I had plenty of money, a beautiful wife who was sober, drugs I didn't have to share, a home which was paid for, and two healthy children. Everything was exactly to my liking.

But no one else shared my positive outlook. I was consistently late for work and left for extended periods of time, offering no explanation as to where I went. I was making mistakes and falling behind in my responsibilities. My speech was indecipherable. My employees frequently found me passed out in the back of the store. Not to mention, I was robbing the business unmercifully to support my habit. Yet somehow, I thought all was well.

In a disingenuous effort to calm Paula's concerns, I started going to AA. But the only times I went was when she saw me go, and I usually got high beforehand. The meeting I attended was called *Courage at Noon*. You can probably guess what time it was held. I would shoot up in the parking lot or in the bathroom and sit through the meeting in a vegetative state. The least fun place to be when you're high is around sober people in an AA meeting. Alcoholics Anonymous is one of the few organizations that not only tolerates people who are full of shit, they expect it. In hindsight, I believe I was reaching for something which was beyond my grasp, as feeble as the effort was.

One afternoon, Paula called and asked me to come to my parents' house. The three of them wanted to talk to me. I politely agreed but knew this impending conversation wasn't going to be enjoyable. I was about to experience an intervention. My loved ones were going to confront me on my bizarre

Brett Douglas

behavior. Naturally, I did what any accomplished addict would do on the way to their intervention. I called my drug dealer. Unbelievably, for the first time ever, Norm had nothing to sell me. The one time I *really* needed to get high, I couldn't. If God exists, He was laughing His ass off at that moment.

As I drove to my parents' house, I listened to a song which beautifully described the situation I found myself in.

Even Deeper

by

Nine Inch Nails

I woke up today
To find myself in the other place
With a trail of footprints
From where I went away

Seems everything I heard
Just might be true
You know me
Well you think you do
Sometimes I have everything
But I wish I felt something

Do you know how far this has gone?
Just how damaged have I become?
When I think I can overcome
It runs even deeper

In a dream, I'm a different me
A perfect you, we fit perfectly
For once in my life I feel complete
But I still want to ruin it

I'm scared to look
It's clear as day
This plan's been long underway
I hear the call
I cannot stay

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The voice inviting me away...

Do you know how far this has gone?
Just how damaged have I become?
When I think I can overcome
It runs even deeper

Everything that matters is gone
All the hands of hope have withdrawn
Could you try to help me hang on?
It runs...

The intervention was much worse than I had anticipated. My parents learned the painful truth; their son was a drug addict. I was forced to admit the extent of my use, although I didn't tell them everything. Mom cried. Robert physically assaulted me. Paula sat next to them, looking down her nose. *How did she end up on that side of the table?*

"Why do you feel like you need to do drugs?" Robert barked.

My response was simple. "To get through the day."

My answer enraged him. He took it as a lack of gratitude for the business we owned and everything he had done for me. I knew I didn't deserve the life I had. But that was the effect of my actions, not the cause. I could have answered his question by mentioning the daily battle to fend off the Demon, or the never-ending turmoil between him and Paula, or the fact that drugs were the only thing that made life worth living. But any of those answers would have enraged him as well.

My parents believed my addiction was an affront, that my behavior was done at them or to them. To be clear, I know my actions affected them, but this

was not a motivating factor in the least. I never once considered their feelings until I watched Mom cry about it. I suspected Robert and Paula were only concerned about their workhorse expiring prematurely. But I was probably being a tad cynical.

No excuse exists for my behavior, but a *reason* does, although I didn't know what it was at the time. Robert and Paula never considered *why* I did drugs. In their eyes, they were good, I was bad, and that's the end of it. On its face, that assumption feels correct. At the risk of sounding long-winded, I will now attempt to explain...

The Morality Fallacy

A statement I regularly heard in AA was, "We are not bad people trying to get good; we are sick people trying to get well." The notion of "good" and "bad" as it pertains to people is a falsehood as if these are inherent characteristics as permanent as eye color. But behavior *can* be judged as "good" or "bad," depending on how it affects other people. This judgment is known as morality and isn't part of the natural world. It's a social construct enforced by cultural norms to prevent human urges from harming others.

For example, the age of consent for sexual activity in the United States is 18. Yet, the age of consent in China is 14. If a 30-year-old has sex with a 14-

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year-old, is the elder a “bad” person? It depends on which tectonic plate the sex took place.

Actions have consequences, and people should be held accountable for what they do. But people are not intrinsically “good” or “bad” nor are they motivated by morality. The human brain performs only two functions: pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. If everyone agreed on what is pleasurable and painful, conflict wouldn’t exist. But this is far from reality. Our *beliefs* as to what is pleasurable and painful determine our behavior. For example, while one person pursues a social gathering because it brings them pleasure or happiness, a different person will avoid the same social gathering because it brings them pain or discomfort. These beliefs are also known as *attitudes*. They determine a person’s actions and are usually not based in reality. In fact, they are frequently quite irrational.

Thus far, this discussion is academic. You may be thinking, *I’ve enjoyed your story, but now it sounds like a textbook. What the hell does this shit have to do with addiction?*

A drug addict, such as myself, has an extremely distorted belief as to what is pleasurable and painful. The physical bliss of drug use will mentally eclipse any pain caused by the abhorrent behavior that accompanies it. This belief is so ingrained in an addict’s mind, some never recover. Mentally connecting pain with drug use must occur before progress can be made, an exceedingly high hurdle to surmount. Unfortunately, my threshold for pain was extraordinary, preventing me from making this association for quite a while.

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At the time, these thoughts never crossed my mind. I behaved the way I did because I knew of no other way to live. Despite what my family thought, I wasn't a "bad" person. Although my actions were deplorable, a reason for my behavior existed.

The Motel

After the fun-filled intervention, the decision was made to send me to COPAC. It worked for Paula; perhaps it would work for me as well. I packed my luggage, loaded the car, kissed Paula, Devin, and Jordan goodbye, and headed to rehab. The trip would take six hours. I brought a bag of weed to smoke on the drive, determined to finish it by the time I arrived. Most addicts tie one on before going to treatment. After getting stoned, I listened to the Pink Floyd album *The Wall*, which tells the story of a man who builds a metaphorical wall around himself to hide his true nature from everyone. In the end, the wall is destroyed, exposing him to the world. I could not comprehend how prophetic that album was.

Comfortably Numb

by
Pink Floyd

Hello?
Is there anybody in there?
Just nod if you can hear me
Is there anyone at home?
Come on now
I hear you're feeling down
Well I can ease your pain
Get you on your feet again
Relax
I'll need some information first
Just the basic facts
Can you show me where it hurts?

There is no pain you are receding
A distant ship smoke on the horizon
You are only coming through in waves
Your lips move, but I can't hear what you're saying
When I was a child, I had a fever
My hands felt just like two balloons
Now I've got that feeling once again
I can't explain you would not understand
This is not how I am
I have become comfortably numb

Okay
Just a little pinprick
There'll be no more AWWWWW!
But you may feel a little sick
Can you stand up?
I do believe it's working, good
That'll keep you going through the show
Come on, it's time to go

There is no pain you are receding
A distant ship smoke on the horizon
You are only coming through in waves
Your lips move, but I can't hear what you saying
When I was a child
I caught a fleeting glimpse
Out of the corner of my eye
I turned to look, but it was gone

Brett Douglas

I cannot put my finger on it now
The child is grown
The dream is gone
I have become comfortably numb

The facility was in a remote location outside Jackson, Mississippi. By remote, I mean nothing but trees for miles. The building was once a motel but had since been converted into a treatment center. Where the rooms once held travelers and vacationers, they now housed alcoholics and addicts, most of whom were from the medical profession.

COPAC's method of rehabilitation was based on the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. While there, I learned a lot about AA and a few things about myself.

- 1) I liked playing tennis.
- 2) I was still an atheist.
- 3) Maybe AA could help me despite the God bullshit.
- 4) I had been high for so long, I lost sight of the person I really was. Surprisingly, when sober, I was charismatic around others. I adapted the recovery lingo and acclimated to rehab life. The counselors were happy with my progress. I also befriended most of the other patients and became a leader of sorts in our social group, although it was cast with people who were as flawed as I. Which leads us to...
- 5) No matter how desolate the location, I could always find a way to get high. I used my façade to acquire drugs, which was discovered by the staff. Where

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Paula succeeded, I had failed. After two months of the three-month program, I left COPAC with my tail between my legs.

As I drove back to Pensacola, my mind wandered back to Richie and me repeatedly repairing then destroying the toy cars we found. I never lost my affinity for that behavior. A pattern was starting to form in my life, one that would continue indefinitely unless I did something different. Also, I would soon have to face Robert and Paula, both with that smug glare of consternation I had grown so accustomed to seeing. I had six hours to plot my next move.

As the road signs indicated Pensacola's impending arrival, I decided against going home or to my parents' house, electing instead to attend an AA meeting. To be completely honest, this book being the first time I have ever done so, my motivation consisted of a 20% desire to get sober and an 80% need to minimize the wrath I would have to endure once I arrived home. But that meager 20% was more than I had ever mustered before.

Don

The AA program suggests getting a sponsor, who is someone that will take you through the twelve steps and teach you how to live a sober life. With my feeble 20%, I walked into an AA meeting and announced I needed a real hard-ass as a sponsor, preferably a cantankerous old fart with an abrasive personality, multiple decades of sobriety and a natural intolerance for bullshit. Don happily volunteered. I felt I had made a modicum of progress.

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Of course, my wife and father were not as enthusiastic about my fragile 20%. Paula was aghast at the way I disrespected COPAC, the facility she credited for her sobriety. She took my cavalier attitude as an insult and was not impressed with my newfound interest in AA or the fact I had a sponsor. She accused me of being manipulative, which was only 80% true.

Robert was even less impressed. He asked me to meet him at the pawn shop the following evening. What he said was completely unexpected. I was informed my employment was terminated and instructed to hand over my keys. I slammed them down on the front counter and yelled, "Here's your keys. Now shove this shop up your fat ass!"

I drove home seething. My parents didn't have the knowledge or experience to run the shop, and Bill was too lazy to do more than a below-average job. After building the business for ten years, I was unceremoniously dismissed as if my work was of no consequence.

I didn't want to admit it, but I had no one to blame but myself. I was the failure Robert always believed I was and did everything I could to prove him right. I had just destroyed the most lucrative opportunity I would ever have. Perhaps now would be a good time to stop using drugs. And so I did.

The End

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I'm kidding, of course. We're just getting started.

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I decided to give AA and sobriety an honest attempt. I went to *Courage at Noon* every day. I also called Don every day, sometimes wishing his voice mail would answer. He harped at me like a parent scolding a child, which got annoying. But I was mentally puerile and had no idea how to live a normal life. Don pointed out I had stopped maturing emotionally when I started using drugs, which was at twelve years old. The truth does indeed hurt.

I tried to do everything he suggested. I read literature on recovery. I opened the meetings and made coffee. I socialized with other people in the program and even played golf with them, which is the most foolish of all human endeavors. You hit a ball as far as you can and then search for it. Once you find it, you hit it as far as you can again. An idiotic activity. I also wrote my first *fourth step*. Some background information is in order.

The Fourth Step

I've already mentioned the first three steps of the AA program. Step one is admitting to myself I have a problem. Step two is conceding I can't fix it on my own. I'm going to need help. Step three is deciding to follow the suggestions of the people who have successfully stayed sober. These steps are an inside job. Deciding to do something is not the same as actually doing it. No amount of promising, talking or writing will suffice. I must be absolutely *certain* I am ready to proceed. The fourth step is when the actual work begins.

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The fourth step reads...

4. Made a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves

I was instructed to write down every wrong I ever committed, every resentment I ever held, every situation, organization, or idea that had ever caused me pain or anguish, and everyone I had hurt or used sexually. This list was my moral inventory. Sustained sobriety would not be possible until I was at peace with the pain, resentment, guilt and shame from the past. Put another way, a reason existed for why I behaved the way I did.

Have you ever seen the commercial on television where this pompous asshole says, “I was a heroin addict for twelve years. Now I’m not”?

That man’s name is Pax Prentiss, the co-author of the book, *The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure*. He claims to have the remedy for addiction, one which isn’t based on the AA program. Wanting to be cured once and for all, I illegally downloaded his book. After reading a long and self-indulgent personal story, I discovered the gist of Mr. Prentiss’s methodology. He described it in the following manner.

Let’s say you wake up in the morning with a bad headache and take ibuprofen. The next morning, you wake up with the same bad headache and take more ibuprofen. Every morning after, you wake up with a bad headache and take ibuprofen. You don’t suffer from ibuprofenism. Rather, you’re simply responding to pain in a way you know from experience will bring relief.

Brett Douglas

Addiction is similar. Drugs stop emotional pain and alleviate self-loathing, if only temporarily.

Although Mr. Prentiss claims his method of recovery is not based on a twelve-step program, it parallels the suggestions of AA. The book you are reading started as an exhaustive fourth step inventory, an effort to discover why I've struggled with addiction my entire life.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I've written four fourth step inventories in my life. Let's review them: Fourth Step #1 – My first attempt was one page in length. This book is 400 pages. Either I wrote the first inventory with an electron microscope, or I was less than thorough.

Fourth Step #2 – I put more effort into this one and started feeling uncomfortable, which is to be expected. This step requires revisiting the most painful, shameful, and remorseful events from the past. I responded to the stress as I always did; I shot some dope and got indignant when I didn't get sober. As silly as this may sound, sobriety doesn't work if you're not sober.

Fourth Step #3 – Writing the inventory is only part of the process. The fifth step reads...

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

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Once the inventory is complete, the next step is to share this list with a sponsor. My third attempt was more thorough, but still deficient. I spent two hours bragging about my sexual conquests as well as a few other things I had done. This should have been an ego *deflating* process instead of an ego *booster*. Of course, I left out the embarrassing stuff. I'm such an asshole.

Fourth Step #4 – You're reading it.

Don looked at my first inventory and said, "One page? This can't be all you got. You're fucked up!" He wasn't known for pulling punches, and his observation was on-point. My effort was hopelessly inadequate. But I didn't understand what he was bitching about. I was sober, and AA seemed to be working for me.

The Phone Book

I needed a job. Since I had computer experience, Paula suggested I try the technology field. “Why don’t you go through the phone book and call all the computer stores in town?”

What a stupid idea. No one gets hired over the phone. Especially for a high-tech job. She’s such a dumbass.

The third business I called, Technologies for Tomorrow, hired me. I guess I was wrong. The company provided computer repair and networking services and was owned by two women, Pam and Liz. Although I wanted to work as a technician, they put me on the sales floor because of my natural ease at closing sales, a skill acquired from the pawn business. Since most people view pawn brokers as crooks, which is accurate, I had less than ten minutes to establish trust with each individual. Sales were much easier to make without the customer’s inherent wariness.

I thrived at the job, and Pam and Liz trusted me. I opened and closed the store, balanced the cash drawer, and made deposits when needed. Although I was a skilled technician and a trustworthy manager, something else was at play here. Many years would pass before I became aware of it.

The Chameleon

I'm a chameleon. I've always felt if anyone knew who I really was, they would run away or, at least, hide their purses and wallets. Thus, I blended into my surroundings and fooled people into believing I was what they needed me to be. This behavior is essential for a practicing addict. But I carried it into sobriety. To be honest, I've always behaved this way.

This elaborate deception started with Robert. I knew I wasn't the son he wanted, so I tried to act like that person. Even though I hated sports, I memorized team names and game scores to dupe him into liking me. I mimicked his opinions on business, politics, or life in general to get his approval and struggled to respond in a manner he found appropriate. But Robert was the most difficult one to fool.

I behaved the same with Paula. She frequently said to me, "You're a bad liar. I can read you like a book." But she didn't really know me at all. If Paula thought she could read me like a book, she needed to order *Hooked on Phonics*. For every deception she uncovered, dozens went undetected. The easiest people to fool are the ones who want to be fooled. She wanted a loving and thoughtful husband. I simply acted like that person. I was a performer instead of a partner.

When I first started attending AA meetings, I quickly learned what to say and how to behave to project the illusion of sobriety, using humor to ingratiate myself with people in recovery. I espoused the virtues of clean living

Brett Douglas

while stoned out of my mind. It was all an act. I dared not let anyone get close to me.

When I worked at Technologies for Tomorrow, I was sober but found myself behaving in much the same way. I observed the personality types of the people in charge, discovered their preferences and pet peeves, and acted accordingly. This was not a conscious decision. My chameleon tendencies are so hard-wired into my character, I have difficulty knowing who I really am. Am I a loving, fun, humorous, capable, and smart person who acts abhorrently when using drugs? Or am I a lying, cheating, thieving, manipulative, self-absorbed drug addict who acts appropriately when it's expedient?

Which is the act?

Which is real?

I still don't know.

This song sums it up nicely.

My Evil Twin

by
They Might Be Giants

My evil twin
Bad weather friend
He always wants to start
When I want to begin
It scares me so
Like I scare myself
With that book of Nostradamus up upon my shelf

Playing hangman till the morning light
Doing donuts on the neighbor's lawn
Then sleep all through the day
Get up and start again
I can hear some sirens somewhere but I don't know why

My evil twin
Runs home again
Searchlights look for an alibi,
But I'll be home by then
Here he comes again
My evil twin
My friends have seen him hiding underneath my skin

Who cut the arm off the voodoo doll
That resembles a Republican president from long ago
I'd hate to see you leave
'Cause I have grown so grateful for the
Blame you save me from
(My twin) I know he looks like me
(My twin) Hates work like me and walks like me
(My twin) He's even got a twin like me

My evil twin
Bad weather friend
I know someday I'll meet him
But I don't know where or when

The Church Project

And now, some geek humor. Years ago, an interface existed which would increase the transfer speed of data to and from the hard drive. It was called SCSI, pronounced “scuzzy,” and stood for Single Computer Simple Interface. It was primarily used in video editing systems, where data transfer speeds were of the utmost importance.

A gentleman entered the store and said to Pam, “I’m the pastor at our church, and I’m working on a video project for our congregation. I need to improve the speed of our editing system.”

“Okay, is it SCSI?” Pam asked.

“No, this is family-oriented material.”

Pam, being a consummate professional, never cracked a smile. But we laughed about it later.

The Decision

Pam and Liz offered me a fantastic opportunity. They asked me to lead a corporate sales division that was recently created, and planned to hire a retired sales manager from HP to assist. The decision seemed like an easy one.

That evening, my parents called and asked to meet with Paula and me. Since my last conversation with Robert was less than pleasant, I was quite surprised. I thought they were coming over to congratulate me on my job offer. But I was wrong. Robert asked me to return to the pawn shop. Except this time, I would assume part-ownership of the business and also manage the bar next door, which he had recently purchased. He promised I could go to AA meetings and finish my computer science degree, towards which I was currently working. From my parents' conciliatory tone, I assumed they realized how much work was involved in running the shop. Their offer was a vindication of sorts, although my sobriety probably had a lot to do with it.

I had a decision to make. I could stay with Pam and Liz and start a new career in a field I loved or jump back into the snake pit and make more money than I ever had. Of course, Paula wanted me to go back to the pawn shop. Her primary concern was the security of our family. I spent a day weighing my options and decided to give the family business another try. My motivation was not money or security. Robert came to me asking for help, and I wanted to be the one who rescued him.

I withheld my decision from Pam and Liz for two days, feigning thoughtfulness. When they learned of my choice, Pam reacted like a true

professional. Liz, however, looked at me with her jaw dropped in disbelief. Her expression seemed to indicate she already knew what I would eventually come to realize. That was one of the worst decisions I have ever made.

The Saddle

The next day, I walked into the pawn shop after a year-long absence. I was back in the saddle again. Unfortunately, saddles can sometimes cause hemorrhoids.

My daily routine went as follows: Arrive at work at 8 am. Open both pawn shop store fronts. Start any pending computer repairs. Walk next door to the bar and do a liquor count. Walk back to the pawn shop and finish the previous day's accounting work. Direct my employees on what needed to be accomplished that day. Leave at noon for an AA meeting. Work at the pawn shop until 5 pm. Walk back to the bar for the afternoon liquor count. Close the pawn shop at 6 pm. Four nights a week, attend evening classes which ended at 9 pm. On the way home, stop at the bar and prepare the purchase orders for the next day. Typically, I got home around midnight.

I was also responsible for the point-of-sale systems for both businesses. Any malfunctions required my immediate attention. All the while, I answered at least one question every fifteen minutes from customers and employees. I performed this routine six days a week. No wonder my parents wanted me back.

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Paula took my long hours in stride. We were both sober and had so much money, we didn't know what to do with it. She purchased a beautiful 2700-square-foot home with a white picket fence and bought all new furniture for every room, as well as a \$700 life-sized metal Doberman Pinscher which stood in the foyer. Every time I walked through the living room, it scared the shit out of me. For a while, life was grand. I graduated with my computer science degree and was co-owner of the largest pawn shop in Pensacola. Why can't things just stay the way they are?

The Newspaper Article

Troy Moon, a columnist at the *Pensacola News Journal*, wrote a weekly feature where readers had their ten favorite albums printed in the newspaper. After reading the article for several weeks, I decided to submit my list, which read as follows:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 10. The Divine Comedy | Regeneration |
| 9. Skinny Puppy | The Process |
| 8. Prodigy | Fat of the Land |
| 7. The Fall | Infotainment Scan |
| 6. Front Line Assembly | Implode |
| 5. Camper Van Beethoven | Our Beloved Revolutionary
Sweetheart |
| 4. Nine Inch Nails | The Downward Spiral |
| 3. Front 242 | 06:21:03:11 Up Evil |
| 2. Love Tractor | Hey, Venus! |
| 1. Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel | Nail |

A month later, Mr. Moon chose my list for his article. The following Thursday, it appeared in the newspaper along with my name, picture and the fact I was the owner of the pawn shop. The next day, I was contacted by a woman named Ann, who saw the article and wanted to speak to me. I agreed and, thinking she was a salesperson, thought nothing else of it.

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That afternoon, a pink Jaguar pulls into the parking lot. A young lady confidently steps out of the sports car and struts through the door. She was very slender with skin-tight jeans, stiletto-heeled boots, and a fur-lined button-up blouse. She had brunette hair with large curls, two stunning brown eyes, and rose-red lipstick adorning her perfect smile. She was one of those women who sucked the air out of a room when she entered. All my employees stopped what they were doing - the men enthralled, the women enraged.

She walked up to me and said, "Are you Brett?"

"Uh...yes." My heart started racing.

"Hi. I'm Ann." She smiled and held out her hand. I stared at it for a second, as if I had never seen a hand before.

"Can you help me?" she asked with an exaggerated pout.

"Well...uh...I'm sure whatever you need, I can help you with it." My store manager, Tina, who was standing out of Ann's view, shot me a disapproving glare as she shook her head.

"I have nothing to watch movies on."

"Uh...well...I've got some DVD players over here," I replied as I walked around the counter. I led her over to the appropriate shelf and handed her one. "You can have it. No charge."

"Oh no. I insist on paying," she said as she handed me some money, which I didn't count. "Thanks, love." She looked me dead in the eyes, shot a quick glance at the money in my hand, then looked me in the eyes again.

Brett Douglas

As Ann strutted out of the store, I examined the twenty-dollar bill she handed me and felt my heart swell up in my throat. Written on the bill were the words, "Call me," and a phone number.

Danny, one of my best employees, was a simple country man who was loyal, honest, and hard-working. He never concerned himself with the affairs of others, regarding such conduct as rude. But he made an exception this time. "You gonna' hit that?" he asked with a shit-eating grin.

"What would make you think that?" I replied, trying to play it cool.

"Cuz' I've never seen you give away something for free."

"Well, she didn't have anything to play movies on," I said, trying to keep a straight face.

Danny laughed. "Well, I'd hit that shit with a quickness."

Although I acted disinterested, I was, indeed, hoping to hit that shit with a quickness.

The next day, I called the number on the twenty-dollar bill. Ann asked to see me. Instead of going to the AA meeting, my first mistake, I went to her apartment. I knocked on the door and heard her say, "Come in." Ann was sitting on her couch, wearing nothing but panties. "I've been waiting for you," she smiled.

"Since yesterday?"

"Come here," she laughed. We had sex three times in a row. She affected me like no other woman ever had.

You're probably thinking, Okay. I've bought everything you've written so far, but I've seen your picture and don't believe this happened.

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Let me explain it like this. Ann saw a business opportunity in the newspaper, and it wasn't in the classified section. I knew this affair was a relationship of convenience. But our partnership wasn't as unseemly as leaving money on the bedside table after sex. I helped her out financially, and in return, she allowed me to do pretty much anything I wanted to her. In my mind, a perfect arrangement. Anyway, after teenage infatuation, the only true aphrodisiacs are money and power.

I discovered Ann was an exotic dancer (okay, stripper) at Sammy's, the most upscale men's club in Pensacola. This made her allure that much more irresistible. She was a drug, and I'm not talking about the sex. After her initial visit to the pawn shop, I felt an unrelenting rush, an intoxicating elation that never abated. This feeling remained internally palpable for over a week, better than any dope I had ever encountered. I wanted to feel this way forever, much like the debilitating excitement a child experiences on Christmas Eve night.

Three days after Ann's initial visit to the shop, she stopped by to say "Hello." We spoke for about ten minutes, and then she left. Danny was quick to comment. "You hittin' that. I know it," he gleefully stated, another shit-eating grin adorning his face. Do people really grin while eating a piece of shit?

"She just came by to say hello," I weakly deflected.

"I saw how ya'll looked at one another. You tappin' that ass."

"Well, I may have tapped that ass once." My ego won out.

"You a lucky mutha' fucker," Danny quipped.

He was right. I did feel lucky. I had a beautiful wife, a beautiful mistress, two beautiful children, a beautiful home, a successful business—

everything a man in my position was supposed to have. Why can't things just stay the way they are?

The Ex-Boyfriend

When Ann called, she usually needed money which meant I was going to get laid. But several weeks into our relationship, I got a call from her that sounded strangely distressed. "Honey, I need to see you as soon as possible."

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"I need you to come by my place. Now."

As I drove to her apartment, I wondered what could be the cause of the urgency in her voice. I already had a vasectomy, so she wasn't pregnant. Ann was a drama-queen at times, but this was different. When I walked through her front door, she was sitting on the couch, fully clothed, and had obviously been crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I broke up with my ex-boyfriend right after we met. He called me today and said he's got an STD."

"What?! Which one?"

"Gonorrhea," Ann quietly answered, withdrawing as she anticipated my response.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!"

American Drug Addict

“No. Please don’t be mad at me.” She started crying.

I paced the floor for a few seconds. “What’s the treatment?”

“Antibiotics.”

Suddenly, my real problem came into focus. For the second time, I had exposed Paula to a sexually transmitted disease. Why does this keep happening? Extramarital sex, perhaps?

Ann and I went to a doctor and received a prescription for antibiotics. I went home early and cooked dinner for Paula. She was surprised by my thoughtfulness, although it had a nefarious purpose. I pulverized several pills and dissolved them in her drink. She didn’t notice. For the next few days, I offered to cook dinner and spiked her drink with the medication.

At the time, I was proud of my craftiness. Ann and I laughed at my audacity as we laid in bed together. Even in sobriety, I felt entitled to do anything I wanted. Little did I know, abhorrent behavior comes with a price.

The Parking Lot

I started coming home later than midnight, which I blamed on work. But the real reason was to watch Ann take her clothes off on stage. On one of my first visits to the strip club, she asked, “Can you stay till closing? I need a ride home.” Apparently, after drinking alcohol and bending over in front of men

for eight hours, she developed some pent up sexual tension. When the bar closed, she hopped in my car and said, “Drive across the street to Whataburger.”

I thought she was hungry. Instead, we made love in the parking lot. No, wait. I take that back. We fucked like rabid weasels in the parking lot, ten feet from the front entrance. Thus began one of the craziest years of my life.

Because of Ann’s state of mind when she got off work, I volunteered to drive her home every chance I got. She would practically rape me as soon as we got in the car. We had sex at convenience store gas pumps, on the hood of my car in the Pensacola Civic Center parking lot, public restrooms, and other unusual locations.

Ann must have bragged to her coworkers about the money I was spending on her because when I walked into Sammy’s, every stripper wanted to talk to me. I was living the dream. Sure, my new-found awesomeness was costing me a fortune, but it was worth it.

The Drink

Jacques is Paula's nephew. He was ten years old when Paula and I met, and I practically raised him, which explains what's wrong with him. Jacques and I have always had a humorous rapport.

Jacques and his girlfriend, Bree, invited me to go out with them for the evening. I suggested we go to Sammy's. They agreed. As soon as we walked through the door, strippers surrounded me.

"Why do all the strippers know you?" Jacques asked.

"Well... uh... I came here last week," I weakly replied. He looked at me as if he got a whiff of bovine defecation.

The three of us sat in a corner booth. Ann approached the table to take our drink order, acting like she didn't know me. I ordered straight cranberry juice but instantly noticed it had vodka in it.

"Drink it. For me," Ann whispered in my ear as she sat with us. So, I did, thus ending my year and half of sobriety. I got drunk with my nephew, his girlfriend, and my mistress. As the night progressed, the four of us laughed hysterically as Jacques and I interacted as we always had, paying no attention to the strippers on stage. Once again, everyone in the club wished they were part of our group. As my buzz intensified, I started to tip my hand.

After Ann left to purchase another round of drinks, Jacques asked, "Do you know that girl?"

"No. Why? You jealous?"

“No. Well, maybe a little. You two seem to know a lot about each other.”

“Uh... remember, I was here last week,” I ad-libbed, somehow remembering the lie I told earlier.

“Well, never in my life have I seen a stripper pay for drinks.”

Jacques observed something I had missed. Ann never spent her own money when I was around. Her generosity was uncharacteristic.

The Movie

A few days later, Paula, Devin, Jordan, and I decided to see a movie. As I looked for my car keys, Paula and the kids walked outside and waited for me. When I joined them, I was stunned by what I saw. Paula and Ann were talking to each other.

“Hi,” I stammered as the blood rushed to my head.

“This is our new neighbor,” Paula informed me. “She lives down the street. I’m sorry, what was your name again?”

“Ann,” she replied as she extended her hand, smiling slyly at me.

“She lives in the house on the corner,” Paula said.

“I don’t actually live there. My friend does. I just visit a lot,” Ann replied.

“Well, isn’t that nice,” I sneered.

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“Well, we gotta` catch a movie. It was nice meeting you,” Paula said.

“I`m sure we`ll see a lot of each other,” Ann responded as she winked at me.

At the theater, I went to men`s room and immediately called her.

“What the fuck was that?”

“My friend lives—”

“Bullshit, Ann! You never mentioned anyone you know living in my neighborhood. What the hell are you up to?”

“Maybe I want to go to the movies with you. I miss you.”

I guess I should have noticed what was happening. My arrangement with Ann had always been straightforward. I had mentioned the word “love” before, but she always shot it down. But ever since the evening with Jacques and Bree, the dynamics of our relationship had changed. Ann started demanding more of my time instead of asking for money.

“Look, baby. I miss you, too. But you knew my situation when we started seeing each other. Paula`s my day life, and you`re my night life. Why can`t you just leave it at that?”

“Because I want more,” she said, her voice starting to crack.

I hung up and joined my family in the theater, but I couldn`t pay attention to the movie. My mind swirled over the recent change of events.

That night, I met Ann in the Technologies for Tomorrow parking lot. As I sat in her passenger seat, she was staring at the floorboard.

“I have something I need to tell you,” she said.

“What?”

"I'm in love with you." Tears dripped from her eyes.

"How many times have I said the same thing to you? And you always blew me off. I thought we agreed not to go there."

"I know."

"So, what changed?"

"I've never met anyone like you. And I've never let myself slip like this." Ann looked at me, black streaks running from her eyes. "I want you to leave Paula and be with me."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes." She started sobbing and hugged me. "Please be with me. I love you."

After an hour of pleading, I finally agreed. I told her I would tell Paula of my decision when I got home.

As I opened the car door to leave, Ann said, "Oh, I almost forgot. I got you something." She reached in the back seat and produced a small, metal dog. "Paula paid \$700 for her dog. I only paid \$15 for this one."

When I got home, I gave Paula the metal dog, leaving out the details of how I acquired it. As she placed it on the mantle, I prepared myself for the conversation I was about to have. I took a deep breath and walked into the living room. Paula was sitting on the floor with Jordan, helping her make a sign for her cheerleading squad. As I looked at them, I thought, *What the fuck am I doing?* One of the few moments of clarity I've had in my life.

The next day, I told Ann I wouldn't leave my wife. Like pulling the drawstring on a lamp, she went dark. No calls. No visits. She refused to answer

her door. After a couple of weeks, I had to face the truth; Ann and I were through. I was despondent. To be honest, I didn't miss Ann. I missed the crazy excitement that followed her around like Pig-Pen's dirt cloud. Every extreme high has an extreme low. Life got boring overnight.

I tried desperately to recreate what I had with Ann. I started seeing a 19-year-old woman named Marlo, who looked like Angelina Jolie, as well as several one-night stands I arranged on the internet. But sex wasn't all I was seeking. I was yearning for the lifestyle Ann afforded me. When I realized these dalliances weren't giving me the excitement I thirsted for, I turned to the love of my life. I started smoking crack again.

The Itch

For the next year, I smoked crack and shot Roxicodone every day. My addiction was back in rare form. Unexpectedly, Paula announced she no longer wanted to be sober. She had eight years of sobriety, but living with a practicing addict had weathered her resolve. It became an itch that intensified with every scratch. She wanted to drink alcohol but claimed she wasn't interested in drugs. The distinction between drugs and alcohol is a fallacious one. You guessed it. Time for another fucking diversion from the story.

The Phraseology Irritation

In my opinion, the phrase “alcohol and drugs” is deceptive and dangerous. Regardless, people say it all the time. For example, commercials for drug rehabilitation centers frequently use this phrase. Some clean-cut queer appears on your television screen and says, “If you or a loved one has a problem with *alcohol and drugs*, call us. We’re here to help. But only if you’re rich or have health insurance. Otherwise, go die a slow, miserable death.”

Why is alcohol presented as if it’s different from drugs? A typical answer is, “Alcohol is legal. That’s why it’s set apart.”

If you believe that, my condolences on your lobotomy. Pain medicine is legal, so that argument doesn’t hold water. In fact, the two legal drugs, alcohol and pain medication, kill more people than all the illegal drugs *combined*. Also, during prohibition, alcohol was illegal, cocaine was in soft drinks, and heroin was sold by the Bayer aspirin company for baby colic. It sure helped me when I was colicky.

Another typical answer is, “Alcohol has no medicinal purpose. Most drugs do.” And if you believe that, you need to stop drooling on yourself when you speak. Before modern anesthesia, alcohol was used instead. It’s also an antiseptic.

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I know what I'm about to say will upset some people, which means it's worth saying. Here goes:

Alcohol is a drug, and an alcoholic is a drug addict whose drug of choice is alcohol.

If, when you drink, you can't control *and* enjoy the amount, or predict your behavior, you're a drug addict like me. I'm no different from Bea and Rex, whose drinking negatively affected their loved ones. The substance may be different, but the selfish, destructive behavior is exactly the same. The three of us willingly traded everything good in our lives for a glass of liquid or a bag of powder.

I often wonder how many lives have been ruined by the belief that alcohol is different from other drugs. I fell into that trap once. After shooting pain medicine for a while, I decided to stop and drink alcohol instead. I reasoned since I didn't like to drink, moderating wouldn't be a problem. I weened myself off the Roxicodone, which never goes smoothly, and started drinking Captain Morgan's and Mountain Dew.

For the first two weeks, I had a few drinks after work. All my employees drank, so I fit in. I discovered if I filled a 40-ounce cup $\frac{3}{4}$ full with Captain Morgan's and the rest with Mountain Dew and drank it as fast as I could, the rush was somewhat euphoric. I started waking up in the morning feeling like shit and drinking half a pint to cure the hangover. By the end of the month, I was drinking throughout the day, even waking up at 2 am, slamming a pint,

then going back to sleep. I bought liquor on my lunch break and drank it straight out of the bottle before returning to work. My manager, Tina, asked me once, “You smell like booze. You drinking during the day?” I told her I was diabetic, and the smell was excess sugar.

Paula caught the worst of my drinking. I would stagger in the front door after work and say things like, “I hate your fucking guts!” and “You’re a worthless whore!” and “You’re the worst wife ever!” and “I hope you fucking die!” Several times, she had to wrestle me for the car keys when I tried to leave.

After enduring my drunken wrath for a couple of weeks, Paula said, “Would you please stop drinking and start shooting dope again? At least you’re pleasant to be around when you’re high.”

I enthusiastically granted her wish. My drinking career lasted two months, but I definitely used alcohol like I used any other drug. Why? All together now...

Alcohol is a drug, and alcoholics are drug addicts.

If you still disagree with me, go fuck yourself.

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies
12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding
13. Always anticipate other people's potential fuck-ups
14. There is no such thing as a "Free Lunch"
15. Alcohol is a drug, and alcoholics are drug addicts

Anyway, back to the story...

When most people relapse after an extended period of sobriety, the event just happens. It's not planned like a vacation. Paula, however, meticulously organized her outing. She picked a date, made a reservation at the

Beau Rivage, a casino and hotel in Biloxi, Mississippi, and bought a bottle of wine for the drive.

On the selected day, we both drank a glass of wine before we left. With one sip, Paula's eight years of sobriety evaporated. As we guzzled wine and drove to Biloxi, Paula called her family and informed them of her decision. Oddly enough, no one seemed as enthusiastic about it as we were. Oh well, fuck 'em.

Paula had eight years to make up for, and she wasted no time. Each drink she ordered was different from the last. Plus, she discovered several liquors and beers she had never tried. By the time we went back to the room at 4 am, she was stumbling drunk and horny. As she staggered around the room removing her clothes, she instructed me to go to the gift shop and buy batteries for her vibrator. Naturally, I rushed to the lobby as fast as I could. When I returned, I found her passed out and naked on the floor, lying in a pool of vomit. Oh well, it's beat-off time.

Paula's experience twelve hours after her first drink is a perfect example of the progressive nature of addiction. Let's pause once again to discuss...

The Disease Concept

Addiction is considered a progressive disease. Let's break that concept down into its corresponding components.

Progressive – happening or developing gradually in stages. Although an addict may abstain for an extended period, once they resume, their drug use will continue as if it had never stopped. Paula's return to drinking certainly bears that out.

Disease – a malady or illness. Addiction is a mental disease. Some people bristle at that idea, thinking it absolves addicts from responsibility for their actions. "Sorry I stole your money to buy drugs. I can't help it. I have a disease." Of course, ten seconds of cognitive reasoning will dispel that belief.

Diabetes is a disease.

Diabetics are not responsible for having the disease.

Diabetics *are* responsible for taking their insulin.

Schizophrenia is a disease.

Schizophrenics are not responsible for having the disease.

Schizophrenics *are* responsible for taking their psych meds.

Baldness is a disease.

Baldies are not responsible for their chrome domes.

Baldies *are* responsible for covering their scalps with Chia Pet seeds and watering them regularly.

In other words, I'm not responsible for being an addict, but I *am* responsible for the treatment.

Another misconception is that addicts are born with this condition. Again, a little logic will demolish that idea. Although most mental diseases are genetic in origin, addiction is an exception. Someone with an addictive genetic disposition who never encounters drugs will not become an addict. At the same time, a different person with no such disposition who associates with drug users can become an addict. Addiction is one of the few mental diseases that is acquired from behavior.

So, if addiction is a disease, what are the symptoms? For me, the predominant one is a mental obsession which starts the second I ingest any mind or mood-altering substance. At that point, I can never get high enough. My behavior, thinking, morals and values change, and I transform into an entirely different person. This compulsion is hard to understand for a normie. I've been asked countless times, "Why don't you just stop?" Addiction is a hunger, and simply stopping is like a starving man turning down a buffet.

When it came to Paula, I thought her one day of drinking was just a passing phase, and she would eventually want her sober life back. But I was wrong.

The Rock

After the Biloxi trip, we decided to spend a weekend with Jacques and Bree. I purchased a quarter-ounce of cocaine, which consisted of one big, pungent rock, and reserved a room in New Orleans. By the time we got to Bourbon Street, I was wasted and started behaving erratically. We left the cocaine in the room; so naturally, we took hourly trips back to the hotel. Every time we jumped in the back of a cab, I barked at the driver, "Take us to the rock!"

Apart from my 21st birthday, this trip was the most fun I've ever had in New Orleans. And a large portion of that fun consisted of my three companions watching me upset as many people as I could. Jacques stopped several men from attacking me because of my obnoxious behavior.

For example, on the back patio of Pat O'Brien's, I saw an older gentleman with a large nose. "You're a Jew, aren't you?" I bellowed.

"Yes I am," the man responded.

"And what do you do?"

"I'm a doctor."

"Of course you are. All doctors are Jews. Hey, Bree, take a picture of me with this Jew," I yelled as I put my arm around him. As she positioned herself for the picture, I said, "Would you hurry up, Bre? I don't want to touch this Jew bastard any longer than I have to."

The young gentleman standing next to the Jewish man, probably his son, didn't find my anti-Semitic quips amusing and lunged at me. Jacques

intercepted. "Look man. He's drunk. Just let it go," he explained as Paula and Bree escorted me out of the bar.

Despite my crazy behavior, I did learn something on that trip. The four of us walked into Harrah's Casino and rented a wheelchair. I sat in the chair and tried to look as gimped and pathetic as possible. As Jacques wheeled me between the gambling tables, I noticed something unnerving. Every single person looked at me and then quickly looked away. Our parents told us never to stare at handicapped people. So, everyone recoiled as if I were a hideous monster. After fifteen minutes, I told Jacques, "I can't do this anymore. It's creeping me out."

As I stood from the wheelchair, I thought of the people who will never stand from theirs. Which leads us to...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
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12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding
13. Always anticipate other people's potential fuck-ups
14. There is no such thing as a "Free Lunch"
15. Alcohol is a drug, and alcoholics are drug addicts
16. Not only should you stare at handicapped people, you should actually talk to them as well

A sense of urgency ran through my actions that weekend. I seemed to be cramming as much frivolity into three days as possible, much like a death row inmate gorging on his last meal. I behaved as if that weekend might be the last celebration, that this trip would be the last party, that perhaps this time was the last time drugs would be fun. And as it turned out, it was.

The ATM

I acquired a new habit. I would draw up 90mg of Roxicodone in a syringe, take a huge hit of crack, then inject it into my vein while I held the smoke. And they only put Surgeon General warnings on cigarettes. This daily routine had to be worse for my health than the two packs a day I was smoking. And, as expected, I started to lose touch with reality.

As I sat in my parked car one day, the vehicle next to me started backing up. For a moment, I thought my car was rolling forward. My interactions with Robert were much the same. From my perspective, his attitude had soured. He argued with me constantly and always seemed unhappy. I thought he was changing, when in fact I was. I believed Robert was reneging on the deal we made when I returned to the shop, but I was one breaking our agreement. He seemed to be rolling forward, but I was rolling backward.

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Paula and Robert's hatred for each other added to the tension that permeated our family. But they never spoke to one another; they expressed their disdain through me. I felt Paula was on my side, and, in her own way, she was. But everything was about to change.

One typical evening, Paula and I drove to Norm's house to score some crack and pills. I was in such a hurry, I forgot to bring the cash. I didn't notice the oversight until we were standing in his living room.

"Sorry, I forgot the money," I said as I rummaged through my pockets. "I'll run to the ATM and..."

"You forgot the cash?" Paula screamed. "You stupid motherfucker! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

The anger in her voice caught me by surprise. I was momentarily stunned but quickly recovered. "What did you just say? Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"You fucking heard me!"

"I'm the one who's financing this party. You better watch your mouth."

Paula got in my face, nose to nose, and bowed up like she was preparing to fight. "And what are you gonna' do, pussy. You're such a fucked-up idiot, you make me sick," she snarled through her teeth.

Norm pushed between us. "Just go get the money. We'll stay here and cool off."

I went to the store, which was less than a mile away. I had never seen Paula react that way, especially over something as insignificant as this. The woman I married was gone, replaced by a person I hated.

The Depleted Resource

I was working at the computer repair bench in the pawn shop when a female customer asked to retrieve her tower. I placed it on the counter.

"This is not my computer," the woman exclaimed as she examined it.

"The service ticket you signed describes this computer."

"Well, I'm telling you, this is not my computer."

"Are you sure? This desktop is brand new."

"I know my stuff. This isn't mine," the lady stated, her voice getting louder.

"Okay, let's boot it up and see what's on it." The desktop wallpaper was a picture of a baby. "Is this your baby?"

"Yes, but this is not my computer," she said.

"Why would your baby be on someone else's computer?" *Especially a baby that ugly!*

"I don't know what's going on. All I know is you're trying to give me someone else's computer. Mine didn't have this." She pointed to a four-slot memory card reader on the front of the tower.

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“Why would I give you a better computer than the one you dropped off? That doesn’t make any sense,” I stated, trying to stay calm.

We argued a little more. I knew the customer was mistaken, so I suggested she go home and get the box it came in. We could compare the serial numbers.

“I’m not going through all that. I’ll just call the police.”

I encouraged her to do so. I thought once the officer heard my side of the story, the issue would be resolved. After several minutes, a female deputy waltzes into the shop.

“This man is trying to give me someone else’s computer.”

The officer turned to me and said, “Why don’t you just give the lady her computer back?”

“But this *is* her computer,” I exclaimed. My intolerance for ignorance was starting to show.

“If the lady says it’s not hers, it must not be,” the deputy said.

I pointed to the screen. “This is her baby. Who else would claim this kid?”

“Fuck you, asshole!” the customer screamed.

The female deputy suggested several ridiculous scenarios I might be using to defraud the woman, all of which I shot down. I finally had enough. “Either arrest me or get the fuck out of my store!”

The deputy pulled the woman aside and spoke to her briefly. Afterward, the customer yanked her computer off the counter. “You’re going to pay for this,” she snarled.

“Give it your best shot, bitch!”

The two women left. I thought that was the end of it. Of course, I wouldn't be telling you this story if it was.

I regularly stayed after closing at the pawn shop so I could work uninterrupted and get high while I did it. One evening, after shooting a substantial amount of dope, I left the store around midnight carrying a handgun in case someone tried to rob me while I walked to my car. I put the pistol under my seat and headed home.

On the way, I pulled out a cigarette and accidentally dropped it between the seat and the center console, so I stopped on the side of the road. As I attempted to retrieve it, I noticed the flashing blue lights of a Sheriff's car in my rearview mirror. I rolled down my window and immediately knew I was in trouble.

“Well, well, well. Look who we have here.” The female deputy I had tossed out of the store was smiling at me. “Get out of the car.” Luck, the natural resource I had depended on my entire life, was now depleted. Without asking permission, the deputy started rummaging through my pockets.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because I have used needles in there.”

She whirled me around, shoved my chest into the side of my car, and cuffed my wrists as tight as she could. She was definitely enjoying this moment.

Within minutes, my car was surrounded by police cruisers with their lights flashing. I was placed in the backseat of a cop car and watched my vehicle

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being searched. An officer approached my window, holding the handgun I had shoved under my seat just minutes earlier. "Is this yours?" he asked.

"Yes. I have it to prevent thieves like you from stealing my shit."

Another officer approached my window with a bag of Roxicodone pills. "We found these. Are they yours?"

"If I said 'No,' would you believe me?"

"What about these?" he asked, holding two methadone pills in his hand.

"Damn. I was wondering where those went. I needed those last week."

Two more officers walked up to my window. "What about this?" the first cop asked, holding a bag of pot.

"Where did you find that? I thought I had smoked it all."

"And this?" the second officer asked, holding a bag of crack.

"Wow! The next time I lose my drugs, I'm definitely calling you guys."

Apparently, cops have no sense of humor. Which stands to reason, since they deal with the dregs of society. Wait. Does that mean I'm part of the dregs?

At the jail, I was placed in a holding cell with several other unfortunate souls. The drugs and needles found in my car were placed on a table in view of my cellmates.

"Look at all that!" one inmate exclaimed.

"Man, that guy's fucked. It's mandatory five years in prison for each pill. That's thirty years," the other inmate replied.

The moron couldn't perform basic math. I had eight pills. That's *forty* years in prison. Idiot.

The Gas Pump

After some time, I finally got to a phone. I called Paula. "Where the hell are you?" she yelled.

"I'm in jail."

"What happened?"

"That female pig I told to fuck off a month ago arrested me. I have bruises on my wrists from that whore cuffing me so tight. Come bail me out."

"How much is your bail?"

"\$50,000."

"How am I supposed—"

"You only need ten percent for the bail bondsman."

"And where am I supposed to get five grand this time of night?" Paula protested.

"Look. I don't care what you have to do or who you have to blow, get me the fuck out of here!" I could feel the Demon knocking on my door.

When I finally walked out of jail, daylight blinded my eyes, and I was breaking out in profuse sweats. I immediately called Norm and instructed him

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to meet me at a convenience store near my neighborhood. I told him I would pay extra if he would hurry. Norm promised he would waste no time.

Waiting on a dealer with the Demon sitting in my lap is one of the most nerve-wracking experiences I have ever had the pleasure of enduring. Each second seems like an hour. Drug dealers know they have a captive audience; customer service is not their priority. Norm was a white guy, so he was as prompt as I could hope for, although he still took too long. In contrast, the black drug dealers I dealt with followed what I call “African Time.”

To understand “African Time,” one must be able to recognize and decipher the units of time black drug dealers use. This conversion chart will help.

Conversion Table for African Time

Unit of African Time	Unit of Real Time
I’m headed to ya’	I haven’t left yet
I’m at the light	Implies the drug dealer is at the traffic light closest to you, but he’s actually at a light somewhere in the United States
I’ll be there in 5 minutes	If a black drug dealer mentions a specific quantity of time, just multiply that amount by three and add two hours
I’m right around the corner	The drug dealer is in the same area code
I’m pullin’ up on ya’	The drug dealer doesn’t know where you are
Stop blowin’ up my phone	I haven’t left yet

Anyway, back to the story.

I pulled up to the gas pump at the agreed upon location and prepared for another excruciating wait. So as not to look suspicious, I got out and pumped some gas. Suddenly, I noticed the female deputy who just arrested me pumping gas into her personal vehicle next to me. She was still in her uniform, indicating she just got off work. I ducked behind the pump and immediately called Norm to arrange a different meeting spot. Perhaps seeing her was an omen I should have acknowledged, but all I was focused on was saying farewell to the Demon.

Once I got home and shot some dope, I could think clearly. I approached this problem the same way I handled every problem. I lied about the circumstances to minimize my culpability. Since the same deputy I threw out of the shop was the one who arrested me, I claimed a vendetta. Seeing her at the gas pump and the bruises on my wrists supported that idea. I told everyone I was arrested for having two Lortabs. Now, I sounded like a target. Playing the role of a victim is a valuable tool in any practicing addict's arsenal. Almost as valuable as dishonesty, but not quite.

After hearing my distorted story, my parents hired Jerry, a prominent attorney in Pensacola. He was certain he could get the evidence thrown out, claiming an improper search. In my heart, I knew he would be successful. I had always managed to weasel out of trouble.

The Celebrity

I returned to work and, much to my dismay, was a celebrity of sorts. My name was in the arrest section of the newspaper. I was surprised at how many of my customers read the paper. I was even more surprised at how many of them could read. Exposure is not conducive to a successful addict lifestyle.

Although most of my new-found infamy was of no real consequence, one part of it bothered me. The parents of one of Devin's friends threw a neighborhood party, and part of the evening's festivities consisted of laughing at my mugshot online. I had brought shame down on my children. Up until this point, concealing my true nature from Devin and Jordan was easy. They both were young and couldn't understand what was happening. Those days were gone. I spent considerable effort creating a grand image for my children to believe, and they both admired the pretense I hid behind. Their admiration was based on a lie. For the first time in their short lives, Devin and Jordan got a peek behind the curtain of the Grand Oz.

As with the memory of the other insidious things I had done, I tried to blot it out with the haze of drug use. An addict's ability to ignore their past actions appears to others as a missing conscience, a lack of morality, or a complete loss of empathy for others. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although these painful memories are not consciously dwelled on, every single one of them lingers. The past follows an addict around like a specter, hardly visible but truly terrifying. This self-loathing is temporally alleviated by drugs. They're called *painkillers* for a reason. The drugs lead to more actions causing

shame, guilt, and remorse. This routine becomes a circular, self-fulfilling prophecy. Much like a freight train rolling down a hill, the weight and momentum become near impossible to stop.

My drug use quickly escalated to the point where my wife, parents, and children couldn't help but notice. I was shooting between 25 and 30 Roxicodone pills a day and smoking crack constantly, which was the only reason I was still coherent. I was so deeply involved with crack; I became hopelessly obsessed with it. The drug consumed my every thought. I no longer cared about Paula, my job, my children or even living. Suicide was the only solution I could think of. Ending my life started to become an hourly consideration. Self-loathing is serious business. When drugs no longer erase it, death seems like the only other option.

Mike

Mom demanded I go see Mike, my last AA sponsor. Instead of killing myself, I took her suggestion. Mike is a remarkable person. We came to AA at the same time, the difference being he got sober and had been for the last twelve years. He had since devoted his life to helping other suffering addicts find recovery. I sat down across from Mike, looked at him with my glassy, bloodshot eyes, and said, "Uncle."

"So, you've had enough?"

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“Yes. Mike, I can’t go on like this,” I pleaded. “I’ll do anything to stop. Anything.”

“Well, you need to go to long-term treatment.”

“Anything but that.”

“Sorry, but that’s my suggestion. Either your parents pony up and buy you some treatment, or they’re gonna’ be buying you a suit,” Mike proclaimed.

I’ve always appreciated Mike’s raw candor. He avoided the lofty vernacular that permeates AA meetings and spoke in a language I could understand. He once warned me, “Brett, if you don’t stop shooting dope, you’re gonna’ wake up bent over a park bench with a condom hanging out of your ass.” Of course, that never happened. Not yet, anyway.

Another gem from Mike was, “Brett, if you really want to stop doing drugs, at some point in the process, you’re gonna’ have to stop doing drugs.”

As silly as that advice sounded, Mike was absolutely correct. I thought some process or writing or meeting or revelation or miracle would stop me from using drugs. The only thing that could stop me was me. Of course, the important part of his statement was, “...if you really *want* to stop...”

I drove home from Mike’s office thinking long-term treatment was out of the question. I couldn’t afford to lose my job at the pawn shop. Little did I know, I already had. Robert set up my ownership in a way where I would lose it if I ever started using drugs again. “Always anticipate other people’s fuck-ups,” Robert once told me, and that he did.

The Cold Turkey

I decided to stop cold turkey and detox myself, a grave decision considering the amount of dope I was injecting. I drove home, laid on the couch, and waited for the Demon's arrival. He was always punctual.

For the next three days, I writhed in pain. Every muscle in my body violently spasmed; I couldn't sleep. Time seemed to slow down, much like staring at a clock and feeling the agony of every second. Sweat pooled up on the leather couch beneath me, having to be sopped up every hour. I vomited feces during the first twelve hours, a result of opiates' dampening effect on the digestive system. The Demon was in rare form. I cried tears of desperation, hoping the pain would subside, but knowing it wouldn't.

My parents decided to take turns watching me while I went through this torture. Robert witnessing my ultimate failure made my suffering worse. As hard as I tried to act normal in his presence, my masquerade was pointless. I was definitely not the son he wanted. After he left, I would never see my father again. To this day, he refuses to speak to me.

While I suffered on the couch, Mike convinced Mom to send me to rehab. He told her the same "buy your son a suit" line he used with me. "Brett, Mike will be here at five to take you to the Friary," she said. The Friary was the most prestigious drug rehab facility in the Pensacola area.

"Okay. Thank you, Mom." My expression of gratitude was genuine. The Demon was getting more vicious by the hour and showed no signs of abating. I laid back on the couch and waited for 5 pm to arrive.

American Drug Addict

My cell phone rang. Before I could sit up, Mom answered it. She was not going to let any drug dealers reach me. "It's Jerry," she said as she handed me the phone. I hoped my attorney would have some good news.

"I just finished the deposition with the female officer that arrested you. She said you looked very intoxicated that night. Unfortunately, that gave her probable cause to search you. I'm sorry, Brett. The best we can hope for is leniency in front of the judge."

"Okay." I hung up. I was in no mood to talk to him anyway.

The Mailbox

Let's start this chapter by saying...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies
12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding
13. Always anticipate other people's potential fuck-ups
14. There is no such thing as a "Free Lunch"
15. Alcohol is a drug, and alcoholics are drug addicts
16. Not only should you stare at handicapped people, you should actually talk to them as well
17. Never underestimate a motivated addict's prowess

American Drug Addict

After abruptly ending the conversation with Jerry, I attempted to place the cell phone on the coffee table, but it fell and rolled under the couch. As I searched for it, I found a used syringe.

Every time an addict awakens, their very first thought is the plan for the day: where to get dope, how to disguise their actions, where to get money, and who will be victimized getting it. Before I dropped the phone, I hadn't thought about getting high. But when I saw the syringe in my hand, my brain instantly concocted an elaborate plan. Drugs are the only motivation for an addict, and plans such as these are not thought out step by step. Instead, they materialize instantly, from beginning to end. I knew exactly what I had to do. I crammed the cell phone in my pocket, walked into the bathroom, and called Norm. "I need ten blues right now."

"Well, I got to go..."

"Fuck that. I'll give you fifty a piece, but you have to come right now."

"You got it. Where are you?"

"I'm at home, but you can't come inside. I'll leave the money in the mailbox. Just put the shit in there. Call my cell phone once when it's done."

"Okay. Be there soon." Never soon enough.

Mom wouldn't let me out of her sight. She was becoming aware of my sneakiness. Just not fully aware.

I placed my phone on vibrate and crammed it in my pocket. I went into the bedroom to change clothes, put \$500 in an envelope, and walked into the living room.

“Can you get me something to drink?” I politely asked as I sat on the couch.

As Mom walked into the kitchen, I darted outside to the mailbox, grabbed the mail, and replaced it with the money-filled envelope. But before I closed the door, Mom rushed outside. “What the hell are you doing?!”

“Just getting the mail.”

“I’ll get that. Don’t you leave this house again!”

We walked back inside. After a hour, Mom’s phone rang. As she walked into the kitchen talking, I felt my phone vibrate once. Relief was sitting in the mailbox.

“That was Mike. He’s coming early to get you. He’s on the way,” Mom said.

Shit! I can’t leave those pills in the mailbox. Paula will do them.

I saw Mom’s cell phone sitting on the arm of the couch. I managed to palm it without her noticing, then walked into the kitchen, took a pudding from the refrigerator, grabbed a spoon from the drawer, and placed her phone behind a sugar canister. As I walked out of the kitchen, I dialed her number preceded by *67, so my number wouldn’t show up on her phone, and sat down to eat the pudding. As soon as Mom stood up to look for her ringing phone, I rushed outside and grabbed the package in the mailbox.

Mom once again ran outside. “I thought I told you not to leave my sight!”

“I was just seeing if Mike was here. I thought I heard him. I’m ready to get this started.”

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I sat on the couch, quickly ate the pudding, and stuffed the spoon in my pocket. As I darted to the bathroom, Mike walked through the front door. Without acknowledging him, I closed the door and locked it.

I had never shot 300mg of Roxycodone at once. The pile of pulverized pills in the spoon was difficult to melt down, but after several attempts, I did it. Mike started banging on the bathroom door, demanding I unlock it.

I held in my hand the most potent shot of dope I had ever concocted. *Either I'm going to feel great, or I'm going to die. Either one is fine with me.*

I felt the sting in the fold of my arm, which no longer mentally registered as pain. The shot hit me hard. I fell to my knees, grasping the sink and trying to stay awake, but wishing I would sleep forever. Mom joined Mike banging on the door and yelling my name. I couldn't answer. All I could do was stare in the mirror, my face barely visible from my position. I looked like a zombie from some George Romero movie.

I don't remember the trip, but Mike eventually got me to...

The Friary

I spent the first few days in the detox room, catching up on sleep. I was given medicine to lessen the withdrawal symptoms, but unfortunately, the nurse wouldn't bring the meds to me. I had to stumble into the nursing area to get them. I must have looked and smelled awful since I hadn't bathed in over two weeks. Withdrawal sweat has a pungent odor. Robin, the tech who was

taking my vital signs, looked at me over her glasses and said, "When we're done here, go get your butt in that shower. I don't want to see you in those nasty clothes anymore. Ya' hear me?" I did as I was told.

Opiates, like Roxicodone, had the exact opposite effect on my libido that cocaine had. I couldn't get an erection to save my life. They completely killed my sex drive. Thus, a minuscule benefit of the withdrawal process was the need to "catch up," so to speak. After my shower, I laid in bed and masturbated three times in a row.

The next day, I was allowed to attend the group counseling sessions. The first one was led by John, who was once a patient at the Friary and had been clean several years.

"I actually brought crack with me into the detox room when I first got here. I didn't know they had cameras in there," John revealed.

I leaned over to the cute blonde sitting next to me. "They have cameras in the detox room?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"Well, they got a show last night."

The blonde barked out a loud laugh, causing everyone to look at us.

After the meeting, she said, "Hi, I'm Barbie."

"Brett," I stammered. I still felt like shit.

She had light blonde hair with tight curls and a genuine smile, accentuated by a deep, hearty laugh, which made her even more attractive. Her voice reminded me of Fran Drescher's, except not excruciating to listen to.

"So, what got you here?" she asked.

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“My sponsor’s truck.”

“No silly, what drug?”

“Roxies and crack,” I shamefully mumbled.

“Yeah, I’m a crack smoker too,” she acknowledged.

“Really? You don’t look like a crack smoker.”

“Yeah, well, you do,” she said. We both laughed.

Barbie was leaving the Friary the next day. We spent the afternoon talking, and I wished her well.

For the first time, I wandered around the facility where I would be spending the next month. Because of my medication, walking was a challenge. The floor never seemed to be where I expected. Eventually, I found the snack room, which had all the ingredients for a roast beef and Swiss sandwich. All I had to do was build it.

As I struggled with the intricacies of sandwich construction, a short, perky redhead walked into the snack room. “Oh, you look like shit!”

“Thanks.”

“You know what I mean,” the redhead said, smiling. “Here, let me help you.”

She prepared my sandwich and placed one of every snack available on my plate. My hunger suddenly became real. As I stuffed my face, the redhead said, “I’m Marion, by the way.”

“Brett,” I mumbled with a mouthful of food. Our conversation was short.

As the days passed, I started to feel anguish over my situation, which came out as emotional outbursts or rude comments to the staff and other patients. I was not very popular, but Marion found my insults amusing, a fact I quickly picked up on. She had an affluent aura, and her voice was imbued with intelligence. Not to mention, she made me laugh. I found myself drawn to her.

Marion and I played a game where we would watch the other patients and guess how long they would stay sober.

“What about that guy?” I quietly asked.

“I think he’ll stay sober a year,” Marion whispered.

“Ya’ think?”

“Oh yeah. What about that one?” She pointed to someone else.

“That guy won’t make it a month,” I predicted. “What about her?”

“She’ll be drunk before she gets home.”

A frail, elderly man walked by with the aid of a walker. Marion pointed to him. “I give him six months...to live.”

As much as we laughed together, I was frequently the butt of Marion’s jokes. She poured pepper into my jacket pockets and laughed while I sneezed during a phone call. I had to retire the jacket.

The staff noticed the chemistry that was developing between us. The Friary had a van which was used to transport patients to AA meetings, affectionately known as the Druggy Buggy. One evening, as I walked down the steps to exit the van, I heard Marion call my name. I turned to face her. “Catch me,” she yelled as she jumped into my arms. I tripped over the curb behind me,

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and we both tumbled onto the sidewalk, laughing hysterically. The crowd standing outside the meeting thought we were drunk.

My counselor suggested Marion and I were enjoying rehab a little too much. Perhaps she was correct. Yet, for the first time in two decades, the urge to get high was gone. In the past, drugs were always in the back of my mind. Sobriety felt like a loss instead of a gain. The only peace I knew involved having an illicit substance coursing through my veins. That synthetic serenity had now been replaced by something substantial.

The Showdown

While I was enjoying my stay at the Friary, Paula discovered Robert had removed my name from the corporate charter, thus ending my ownership of the pawn shop. Paula and her mother went to the shop to talk to my parents. The showdown had begun.

Without me as a conduit, Paula and Robert faced off for the first time. It did not go well. Since I wasn't present, I can only relay what I heard from witnesses.

Paula started the conversation by telling Robert he was an "arrogant sawed-off motherfucker" who was the reason I used drugs. Robert responded by telling Paula she was just like Bea: an ignorant, loud-mouthed drunk who was unappreciative of everything he did for her. They continued yelling obscenities and finally lunged at each other as if they were going to fight. My

and Paula's moms had to get between them. Paula and Robert finally got a sample of what my life had been like for the past fifteen years.

While my wife and father were trying to kill each other, I was learning a few things at the Friary.

1) Although I still didn't believe in God, my counselor suggested a concept I found acceptable. "Why don't you use the word God to mean 'doing the next right thing,' as in Good Ordery Direction, or use the people in AA as your higher power, as in Group Of Drunks?"

2) I had achieved two of the big three. During a group session, a counselor mentioned, "An addict's lifestyle has only three possible outcomes: jails, institutions, and death."

To which I responded, "Well, I've been to jail, but I've never been to an institution, and I'm still alive."

The counselor smiled and said, "What do you think the Friary is? Rehab is a mental institution."

Shit.

3) Wearing cowboy boots with jeans tucked inside looks ridiculous.

4) I spent my life futilely searching for happiness in external things like drugs, relationships, status, money, or food. Happiness, or lack thereof, is actually a by-product of my conduct. I've heard that statement before and thought it was a hokey cliché. External things like honeybuns made me happy. So did Ann. So did the prestige of owning the pawn shop. So did money and dope. But those things were temporary. I eat, then I'm hungry again. Ann was gone. So were my business, money, and drugs. Oddly enough, I was content. Why?

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5) I was content with myself. Years before, during my stay at COPAC, I felt the same way. For some reason, the seclusion of rehab seemed to improve my self-esteem. Sure, I wasn't getting high, but drugs were the effect of my self-hatred, not the cause. As I wiped away the smut of addiction, the person I found was someone I liked. And Marion helped me see this. She made me feel good about myself, something I wasn't accustomed to. Which leads us to...

6) I was falling in love with Marion. More than once, she said, "I can't wait to tell my friends I found the love of my life in rehab."

Marion left the Friary one week before me. On the day I was released, she pulled up in her convertible Corvette and laid on the horn. I jumped into the passenger seat while the other patients played volleyball. The councilor just shook her head. We spent several days basking in our new love. Unfortunately, two problems existed with our new-found affection: my wife and her husband. Our children complicated things further. Marion and I never had a physical relationship. I didn't want to taint our chemistry, which I had grown to cherish. After leaving the Friary, Marion and I spent time together but were both preoccupied with our own families and responsibilities. We were no longer isolated from the rest of the world, which allowed us to focus solely on each other. Outside of the Friary, our relationship changed. We eventually stopped seeing each other. I truly miss Marion, the one person who took my hand and said, "I love you just the way you are."

The Meeting

After leaving the Friary, I was ready to start a clean life, convinced this stab at sobriety would take hold. I could finally put my problems behind me. At my court hearing, the judge gave me a year and a half of probation, which required a monthly meeting with my probation officer and successfully passing a drug screen. Since I was sober, the requirements of my sentence shouldn't have been a problem. But I tend to unnecessarily complicate things.

Paula tried to hide her drug use from me, but I knew. You can't bullshit a bullshitter. My only option was to focus on myself and stay out of her way. Thus, I attended a lot of meetings. Being a felon, I knew the job market wasn't clamoring for me, so I decided to do something Robert said I wasn't capable of doing: start my own business.

Over the next two months, I secured a loan, purchased the necessary permits and licenses, rented a storefront in a shopping mall that was still under construction, and bought an illuminated sign to go on the front when the mall was completed.

One typical evening, I went to an AA meeting. I knew how excited Paula must have been when I left because I felt the same way when she was sober. I could stop pretending, if only for a couple of hours. When a sober person is living with a practicing addict, even when both people are cordial, a tension exists, a disconnect that is impossible to mend.

At the meeting, I was surprised to see a familiar blonde sitting outside smoking a cigarette. "Barbie?"

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“Oh, my God! Brett. How are you?”

We hugged and exchanged stories about sober life. I also offered to give her a ride to meetings in the future.

Now, let's pause for....

Addict Thinking II

Yes, it's a sequel. In normal circumstances, the mind's thoughts and the body's actions complement one another. In other words, the thinking of a normie will not deceptively put them in harm's way. An addict's mind, however, works to the body's detriment. It will seek out situations which could lead to drug use, whether the addict is currently using or not, and mask the actual motivation with noble intent. When I offered Barbie a ride to meetings, I had no conscious desire to use drugs and just wanted to be helpful. But I didn't offer any male friends a ride. I didn't offer any women I didn't find attractive a ride. I certainly didn't offer anyone with long-term sobriety a ride. Most important, I didn't tell anyone of my generous offer. If my motivation was indeed noble, why the secrecy?

My brain was fooling me. That statement may sound absurd, as if I'm a hapless victim of my thinking. Sadly, it's true. Addicts struggle with this dichotomy. For example, while sober I would sometimes drive past places I had purchased drugs before. I had no intentions of buying dope or stopping the car. I just wanted to see that spot again. An addict's mind is constantly playing a

chess game with the body, and the mind is always ten moves ahead. This disconnect between the mental and the physical is the most important reason for having an AA sponsor. If I had informed Mike of my vacuous benevolence, he would have seen my true motives. I didn't tell him.

A couple of weeks later, I pulled up to Barbie's house to pick her up. When she got in the car, she said, "I want to get high."

"Okay." I didn't resist.

We purchased everything we needed and went back to my house. Since it was the middle of the day, no one was home. As we smoked crack, my sexual shyness dissipated. "Do you find me attractive?"

"Very," she said.

"Why haven't you ever said anything?"

"Because you were always 'Marion, Marion, Marion'."

"Well, here I am," I said.

Barbie lunged at me, and we kissed. I started to take my shirt off, but she stopped me. "Not now. I don't have time. I want this to last. Meet me tonight at the Best Western when you leave for the meeting." Barbie put something in my hand. "And be ready," she whispered with an evil grin. It was a Viagra pill.

That evening, I met her at the motel with a large amount of crack. While we had sex, she reached back and handed me a loaded pipe. Right before I climaxed, I took a huge hit. It was the most intensely pleasurable sensation I had ever experienced. At that moment, sex and crack became inextricably

entangled. I didn't want one without the other and would enthusiastically chase this feeling through the gates of Hell.

My home life became more bizarre and dysfunctional than ever. I hid my drug use from Paula, and she hid hers from me. This Jerry Springer episode didn't last long. I soon failed a drug screen and was taken back to jail. The judge gave me no bond, which meant I was going to be incarcerated for a while.

The Vacation

My state-imposed vacation started in a holding cell while I waited to be taken to general population. After two days, I was escorted to my cell. *At least no one will know me here.*

My cell was actually a spacious room with approximately seventy-five other men and several rows of bunk beds. As I walked into the pod, someone yelled, "Brett! What the fuck are you doing here?"

That person was Charles, a man I knew from AA. As I got accustomed to my new environment, I met two other men who, like Charles and me, attended AA in the past, started using drugs again, and were now in jail. The significance of this did not escape me. The ominous warning from the counselor at the Friary came to mind: "Jails, institutions, and death."

Other than the ex-AA members, the first person I spoke to was a mostly toothless, country man named Ray, who was there for pawning a stolen bicycle at my family's shop. He claimed to be an ordained minister. *Aren't all*

hillbillies ordained ministers? Although I disregarded most of his incoherent rantings, he did say something which resonated. “Ya’ know, God hates idolatry.”

“What?”

“It’s true. It’s one of the Ten Commandments.”

“No, I mean, what’s idolatry?”

“Idolatry is the worship of false idols. In your case, drugs are a false idol.”

After our conversation, I thought about the meaning of idolatry. Drugs *were* a false idol. AA’s suggestion of developing a concept of a power greater than myself was one I had fought, believing that caving to that idea, admitting I may have been wrong since I was twelve years old, meant intellectual defeat. But drugs were my higher power. They had vanquished every other force which had once empowered me: willpower, morality, love, compassion, or intelligence. I bowed at drugs’ altar every day of my life and did exactly what they told me to do. Either drugs were the one and only great power in the universe, or I was missing something.

A Note to the Reader

If you already have a concept of God, you can skip this section. If, however, you are an atheist, one who says “God doesn’t exist,” an agnostic, one who is too much of a pussy to say “God doesn’t exist” so instead says “I don’t know,” or you have an innate hatred or suspicion of organized religion, I want to assure you this story will not deteriorate into a Christian sermon, an “I found Jesus” testimony, or a series of Bible quotes. I must discuss some spiritual concepts, so please bear with me. You will see the entire “God” thing in a different light when I’m finished. I am not a Christian, Jew, or Muslim. Rather, I’m a hopeless drug addict who wants to change. No amount of religious dogma would ever help me in that regard.

The Corner

Every evening of my mandatory vacation, I called Paula to check on her, Devin, and Jordan. At first, the conversations were pleasant, probably friendlier than I deserved. Yet, as the days dragged on, Paula's tone started to change.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Stressed. You know how hard this is on me?"

"What's wrong?"

"Ya' know, I have to do everything now," Paula snapped. "I have to work all day, take care of the kids, do all the cleaning, pay all the bills. Why do I have to do this shit because you're a fuck-up?"

"You don't think I would trade places with you if I could?" I was getting annoyed.

"Don't give me that bullshit."

"Let me ask you this. What did ya'll have for dinner?"

"I took them to Chili's cause I didn't feel like cooking."

"Chili's huh? Well, guess what I had for dinner. The taste and texture equivalent of cow shit! I didn't even eat it; it was so bad. And if I get hungry in the middle of the night, I can't walk to the fridge and grab something—"

"Sorry, but I don't want to hear your sob story."

"Sob story?! You're the one with a sob story! I go to sleep listening to other men fart, and you're bitchin' about feeding our children? What the hell is wrong with you?!"

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“Fuck off!” Paula hung up.

My question was a rhetorical one. I knew what was wrong. I had once felt the same way. Every moment spent dealing with life was one less moment spent enjoying my buzz.

I felt despondent. My children were ashamed of me, and my wife wasn't concerned about me at all. After moping for a couple days, I needed to get my mind off my predicament. I looked around the pod for something to read. Of course, the only books available were Bibles. I laid back down on my bed and pouted some more. Suddenly, something occurred to me. *I've criticized this book my entire life, and I've never read it.*

Thus, with nothing better to do, I started reading the Bible. Some of the chapters were interesting. The Book of Numbers, however, was like reading the instruction manual for a blender. Proverbs was like reading a printing template for a fortune cookie company. But the story of Lot's daughters was distressing. Getting an erection while reading the Bible is uncomfortable, even for a heathen like me.

Much to my surprise, one story helped me turn a corner I thought I could never navigate. In Exodus, when Moses was leading the Jewish slaves out of Egypt, they came to the Red Sea. The group said to Moses, “We can't pass. We'd be better off slaves in Egypt.”

The Red Sea parted, and they made it through. Soon after, the Jews got thirsty and told Moses, “We have nothing to drink. We'd be better off slaves in Egypt.”

Suddenly, they found water, but it was unfit to drink. The Jews told Moses, "The water is bitter. We'd be better off slaves in Egypt."

Moses made the water drinkable. Soon after, the Jews got hungry and said, "We have no food. We'd be better off slaves in Egypt."

At this point, if I were Moses, I would have said, "The next time one of you Jews complain, I *am* sending you back to Egypt. And good luck crossing the Red Sea again!"

After reading this passage, I thought of all the calamities I had experienced in my life: the car accident, drowning in my own vomit, being robbed at gunpoint, knifepoint, and screwdriver-point, overdosing multiple times, losing Devin while I was high. I thought of all the opportunities I threw away, the relationships I had destroyed, the trust and love I had betrayed. After surmounting these adversities, my attitude was always the same. "I'm better off being a slave to drugs."

I attributed my survival to luck, an imaginary resource I perceived as an actual substance. I never once thought to be grateful for simply being alive. Catastrophe was simply the cost of doing business. Having such an epiphany was remarkable for an atheist like me, but a different book would drive the point home.

After complaining to Mom about the lack of reading material, she mailed several books to the jail, but the guards allowed me to have only one: the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was pissed. Reading the cryptic messages and archaic language of the Bible had become tedious. Trading one

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God book for another didn't thrill me in the least. Not to mention, I had already read the AA book. Well, most of it. Okay, some of it.

The first chapter of the Big Book tells the story of Bill W., the founder of AA. He was an alcoholic of the hopeless variety until one evening, a former drinking buddy visited him. Bill's friend was sober, an accomplishment he attributed to religion. When Bill expressed his disdain for such things, his friend casually mentioned an idea which became the cornerstone of the AA program, and in my opinion, the reason it still exists almost a century later. "Why don't you choose your own conception of God?"

I had read that line before, but reading it this time caused me to see a glaring flaw in my atheistic belief. Every time I had argued against the existence of God, I was negating *someone else's* concept. All atheists are guilty of this fallacy. I had never considered what I believed God was. Why did I care so much about what other people think? Finding fault in the beliefs of others was easy. But how could I not believe in *my* concept?

This revelation was a thorny pill to swallow. Atheism was such an important idea. To abandon it and admit my reasoning had a fundamental flaw seemed drastic. Atheism made me unique, controversial, and more intelligent than others. Of course, I *was* sitting in jail, so I'm not sure how intelligent it made me. I spent a lifetime thinking about what God isn't. Now, I had to decide what He is.

I outright reject the God of organized religion. God is frequently referred to as *He* or *Him* as if God has a gender. My penis, the most irrefutable symbol of my gender, has caused me to make some pretty stupid decisions, a

primordial urge God is not plagued with. But I understand the notion of semantic respect. Referring to God as *It* seems wrong for some reason. Also, religious doctrine states He is a jealous God, which implies He is afflicted with emotional frailties. And since God suffers from envy, He must also suffer from the other Seven Deadly Sins, which makes Him an angry, fat, egotistical, womanizing, filthy, titty-baby. Wow! Simon Cowell is God!

The most common analogy used *for* the existence of God is the watch and the watchmaker. A watch is a complex system which could never spontaneously generate by happenstance. It must have an intelligent designer: the watchmaker. The complexity of the natural world seems to indicate a similar creative force, which is called God. Now, let's reverse this argument. The designer of the watch isn't another watch. The watchmaker is beyond anything the watch could ever be. The creator is always above the creation. Similarly, God is something that is impossible for humans to completely understand.

Years ago, the *Pensacola News Journal* ran a story about a man who took his infant child to the top of the Bob Sikes Bridge and threw him over the side. During an AA meeting, someone asked, "How could God allow something like that to happen?"

Of course, Mike had the correct answer. "That's not God. That's lack of God."

For me, God is simply the natural order of things. No one will ever see a cat, carrying her kitten in her mouth, walk to the top of a bridge and toss it over the side. In the natural order of life, parents raise, love, and nurture their children.

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When I drop something, which happens more than I would like to admit, the object falls to the ground. Not sometimes. Not most of the time. Not 99.99999% of the time. But *every* time. Gravity is a universal truth. That is God.

On a more personal level, using drugs to elevate my mood or anesthetize my feelings does not fall within the natural order of life. I'm supposed to feel emotions. Pain and sadness have a function; they're not meant to be blotted out. Also, a higher power insinuates a higher purpose for my life other than self-gratification. That is God. As the counselor at the Friary told me, "Good Orderly Direction."

This newly discovered concept also resolved another quandary. Scientific knowledge and spiritual beliefs had always seemed mutually exclusive. In other words, the two mindsets appeared contrary to one another. For the first time, I understood the two ideas were harmonious. If God is the natural order of life, then science is the study of God's marvel. If God created Man, He did so through the process of evolution, which is a natural progression. Man is part of nature, not above it. Science is man's feeble attempt to understand how God works.

What happened next may sound silly, trivial, or unbelievable to some. I refused to eat jail food and lived on Ramen noodles and honey buns instead. Mostly honey buns. But the excess sugar caused severe acid reflux. I suffered from it regularly during my incarceration. One night, before I went to sleep, I did something I had only done once before in my life. I prayed. "God, please take this heartburn away."

The next morning, I had been awake for several hours before I realized my acid reflux was gone. Although my attempt to eat every honey bun in Pensacola did not stop, I was heartburn-free for the remainder of my stay. Intellectually, I knew a logical reason had to exist for this change. But I had to admit, the timing was remarkable.

After some more thought (I tend to overanalyze everything), I started to grasp the causality of prayer. I didn't think praying *caused* my heartburn to go away. Instead, it created awareness and gratitude. I never would have noticed the absence of my acid reflux if I had not prayed about it. And I can't feel grateful for something without acknowledging it first.

For instance, when my employer hands me a paycheck, my attitude will fall into one of two categories: indifference or gratitude. Since I worked the hours and had the money coming to me, indifference is the default position. I may feel satisfied or relieved about receiving the check, but these feelings are not the same as gratitude. In fact, they are degrees of indifference.

If, once I was handed the paycheck, I prayed or said to myself, "God, thank you for this paycheck," then I think of it as a gift. Feeling grateful for a gift is almost automatic, requiring little or no effort. Thus, prayer facilitates a healthy outlook on life.

Without daily vigilance, gratitude fades like sunlight at dusk. For example, every time I started a new job, I felt gratitude. I was thankful the demeaning process of interviewing and the financial stress of being unemployed were finally over. Within a short time, however, my gratitude faded. I complained about the long hours, the unenjoyable work, and the unpleasant

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boss. The job didn't change; I did. I used drugs to elevate my mood. Gratitude does the same thing.

I started praying every morning, "God, thank you for this opportunity in jail. Help me gain something useful from this experience and accept whatever happens." Despite the loss of freedom and Paula's hateful rantings, my feelings about the situation improved. I saw my incarceration as a gift instead of a curse. My circumstances had not changed. My attitude had. So much so, the officers in my pod nicknamed me "Laughing Guy."

I don't think anyone is listening to my prayers, but I must admit, it does work. Mom immediately noticed the change in my mood. Where once I was frustrated, I was now upbeat, positive, and full of hope. My tense conversations with Paula no longer bothered me. I knew the police didn't pull me out of church service and throw me in jail for no reason. I put those walls around me.

The morning of my court hearing, I prayed for the ability to accept whatever the judge decided. If I had to spend more time behind bars, I would call it God's will and try to make the experience a positive one. This was an opportunity to correct myself. Jails are called *correctional* institutions for a reason.

Jerry instructed Paula to bring my college diplomas, a copy of the lease for my business, family pictures, and anything else that would attest to my character to court. As I stood in front of the judge, I learned she didn't bring any of those things. The state's attorney wanted me to spend a year and a half in prison. Not county jail, the Big House. My probation officer recommended

the same. But the judge gave me another year and a half of probation with community control.

I walked out of jail a different man. Because of the honey buns, my pants no longer fit. But more important, I felt hope for the future. Paula wasn't there to pick me up, so I started walking. During the stroll, I realized God has a twisted sense of humor. He made me an atheist, then gave me a disease only God can heal. If I were Him, I would do something like that just to amuse myself.

The Salt Shaker

A condition of my probation was community control, which meant I had to report to my probation officer, Becky, every Monday morning and submit a schedule for the entire week. I was allowed to go to work, AA meetings, and home. If she caught me any place other than what was on the schedule, I immediately went to prison for a year and a half. I also had to submit to random drug screens. A final condition was no drugs or alcohol of any kind in my house, which included Paula's beer and wine in our refrigerator.

Community control did have its advantages, other than accountability. One evening as I watched television, Paula called me. "Come up to the grocery store. My battery's dead."

"No," I gleefully responded.

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“What the hell you mean ‘no’?”

“Coming to get you is not on my schedule.”

“Just come up the street and jump me off. It’ll only take a second,” she yelled.

“No way. If Becky comes by here and I’m gone, I’m going to prison.”

“God, I’m so sick of hearing that bullshit.”

I always had a problem saying ‘No’ to Paula. When she said ‘jump,’ I jumped. She manipulated me with ease, making life miserable until I capitulated. I did my best to make her happy, if for no other reason than to keep the peace. Paula enjoyed exerting her control and watching me flail about in a futile attempt to please her. For example...

“Would you grab the salt for me?” Paula politely asked as we ate dinner.

“Sure,” I retrieved the salt shaker from the kitchen.

She waited until I sat down and said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I need the pepper too.”

I retrieved the pepper shaker and sat down to eat.

“Oh, I need the ketchup also.”

“Okay.” I went into the kitchen to get the bottle. “While I’m in here, is there anything else you need?”

“You don’t have to be a fucking asshole,” she yelled.

This type of exchange occurred so often, I couldn’t believe it was unintentional. Thus, I enjoyed saying ‘No’ to her, a pathetic victory for sure.

The Strip Mall

As soon as my schedule allowed, I drove to the strip mall where I had rented a space. During the drive, a knot developed in my stomach. I imagined the mall being full of operating businesses with my spot being the only vacancy. Much to my surprise, all the stores were still empty, and my space was the only one with an illuminated sign mounted on the front. The name of my business was Hard Drive Computers.

Six weeks after my release from jail, despite the restrictions imposed by community control and Paula's hostility, Hard Drive Computers was open for business. The first month, I earned enough money to cover the shop's expenses. By the second month, I made a small profit, which was remarkable. Small businesses typically don't see a profit for at least three years.

While working, I didn't focus on money. I prayed every morning, "God, show me how to be of help to others." Concentrating on solving my customer's problems instead of how much money I could get out of them caused me to make more money. It's rather counter-intuitive.

The Change

My customers trusted me, a position I was not accustomed to. And they were not the only ones. Becky observed how serious I was about sobriety and my community control obligation. I followed my schedule to the letter and

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could recite the exact number of days I had been sober whenever she asked. This amused her for some reason. Devin and Jordan were excited to have their father back. But Mom's response touched me the most. Standing in front of my store, tears welling up, she said, "You don't know how grateful I am you're sober. I had resigned myself to the fact I was going to have to bury my son." At that moment, I realized how deeply my behavior had affected her. Although I was an adult, I was still her child.

My friends in AA definitely noticed a difference in me. I was sober and, for the first time, doing everything the program suggested. I went to a meeting every day, worked all twelve steps with Mike and was sponsoring other men. I started an AA meeting at a newly opened rehab center. I took meetings to the Friary and to the same jail I was incarcerated in. Everyone seemed to approve of the change in me except two people: Paula and Robert.

Robert refused to speak to me. If he needed computer work, he left his house before I got there. He also refused to see the business I had started or acknowledge I had done what he said I couldn't. Jeffrey Dahmer's father visited his son in prison once a month. So, according to my father's actions, I was worse than a cannibal.

Paula's displeasure with me was even more disheartening. Since she was still using drugs, the disconnect between us was worse than ever. She regularly complained about the money I spent to open Hard Drive Computers and wanted me to close the business and get a nine-to-five job. But, once the shop started making money, she stopped complaining about the cost of startup and shifted her ire to the fact that her name wasn't on the corporate charter or

the business checking account. We fought bitterly over the ownership issue. Technically, since we were married, she owned half of the business anyway. I simply didn't want to succumb to her demands. Plus, I enjoyed saying 'No' to her, something I was getting accustomed to.

Another issue we fought about was her cavalier attitude concerning my probation stipulations. Paula outright refused to stop bringing alcohol into our house. To make matters worse, she insisted on drinking beer on our back porch, which was visible from the street. I asked her to pour the beer into a plastic cup, but her response was usually along the lines of, "You're just paranoid. I'm so sick of listening to your bullshit."

Which leads us to....

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies
12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding
13. Always anticipate other people's potential fuck-ups
14. There is no such thing as a "Free Lunch"
15. Alcohol is a drug, and alcoholics are drug addicts
16. Not only should you stare at handicapped people, you should actually talk to them as well
17. Never underestimate a motivated addict's prowess
18. When fear is genuine, paranoia become insightfulness

The Mirror

Some people don't believe in Karma. Those people are simply not paying attention, or they're stoned. The roles were now reversed; I was sober, and Paula was using drugs. Karma had turned the tables. When I looked at her, I was staring into a mirror that reflected my past self. The only time she was kind and attentive was when she was high. If dinner was prepared when I got home, I knew Paula had shot dope. On those evenings, she placed a plate of food in front of me with a smile and brought me anything I needed while I ate. But she wouldn't look me in the eyes. I never realized how creepy that behavior was until Paula was doing it to me. The person I lived with was cheerful and considerate, but I knew her mood was induced. Knowing I had nothing to do with her happiness made her actions annoying. I also knew from personal experience that when the drugs were gone, her demeanor would change drastically. I begged her to stop using drugs but remembered her asking the same of me when she was sober. I asked her to go to AA meetings with me; her response was the same one I gave her before. Every day, I was forced to stare into this mirror at my past dysfunction. But I was rendered mute. How could I denounce behavior I had once been guilty of?

For many months, I came home to an overly happy and attentive wife, an angry and bitter wife, or a depressed and suicidal wife. I never knew which person would be waiting for me until I walked through the front door. I just accepted my new reality and focused on my business, probation, and recovery.

At least, until I discovered the reason Paula was so adamant about having her name on the business.

The Checking Account

While at work, I placed an inventory order, but my debit card was declined. Panic rushed through me. I initially thought I had made some colossal error balancing the checking account until I examined it online. Paula had taken several thousand dollars from the account, leaving me with a zero balance.

Enraged, I raced home, but Paula was gone. Beer bottles littered the back porch, and a needle and spoon were lying under our bed. Simply accepting my new reality was no longer going to work. If I went to prison because of my own stupidity, I could live with that. But if I was locked up because of Paula's actions, I might as well physically hurt her. I was going to prison anyway, right?

Instead of resorting to violence, I made a bold and risky move. I told Becky what I had found and that I wanted to move out. She was stunned by my revelation. "To be honest, Brett, I have never had someone tell me what you just told me."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's better than *me* finding that stuff in your house," she said.

"I'm not going to prison because of her."

Becky gave me permission to change residence. That evening, I packed my belongings and left a note for Paula informing her of my decision.

For the remainder of my probation, I lived alone in a small, mostly empty house, which came with only three amenities: an inflatable mattress, a refrigerator, and a microwave. The house had no cable, but I didn't have a television. I did have a laptop but there was no internet. On its face, this arrangement would seem like a raw deal. All I had to do each morning was pray or say to myself, "God, thank you for this gift. Help me learn something from this opportunity."

The year I spent in that empty house was the most peaceful time of my life. Although I was alone and had very few possessions, I felt like I had everything. I also realized, whether at rehab, jail, or an empty house, I was at peace when Paula and Robert weren't around.

The Hypocrite

After successfully completing my probation, I moved back home. Much to my consternation, everything was pretty much the same. The only difference being, I refused to accept Paula's behavior. I confronted her every time I noticed she was high, causing some of our most vicious fights, all which Devin and Jordan endured. This time it wasn't my fault, but that didn't matter. I took Paula to the Friary four separate times, each one ending with her leaving after a few days. On her last visit, she left in a cab the day after I dropped her off. I didn't see her again for a week. The divide was widening between us.

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When I tried to reason with her, she said, "You're complaining about me? You drove me crazy for eight years. You're such a fucking hypocrite."

According to her logic, my past mistakes were a viable excuse for her current conduct. I realized something...

Shit I Know To Be True

1. Don't give tube socks to children for Christmas... EVER
2. A preoccupation with external appearances is sometimes used to hide something unattractive on the inside
3. The closest we come to immortality is the positive legacy we are remembered by
4. Those things that make us different, make us better
5. All good things go bad eventually
6. Do not moon cars in your own neighborhood
7. Never eat in a restaurant where the cooks are laughing hysterically
8. No matter how small the detail, never compromise yourself for love's sake
9. Sometimes, what seems like an insignificant decision can become a life changing event
10. Always fasten your seatbelt, even on short trips
11. Properly motivated, everybody lies
12. Never have a bachelor party the night before your wedding
13. Always anticipate other people's potential fuck-ups
14. There is no such thing as a "Free Lunch"
15. Alcohol is a drug, and alcoholics are drug addicts
16. Not only should you stare at handicapped people, you should actually talk to them as well
17. Never underestimate a motivated addict's prowess
18. When fear is genuine, paranoia become insightfulness
19. Being a hypocrite doesn't make you wrong

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Paula did tolerate my nonsense for a long time, managing to stay sober throughout. Her past dedication to clean living amazed me. I was three years sober and felt myself wavering. My home life was incredibly miserable, and I had no way of escaping. I brought up divorce, but she was quick to respond. “If you leave me, I’ll make you sell that fucking shop, and I’ll take half.”

I couldn’t fathom that scenario. Hard Drive Computers was the accomplishment I was most proud of. But the store had grown to a point where the amount of work was more than I could handle. My niece, Whitney, tried to help, but the stress was affecting me. I had a business which had grown beyond my capabilities, a wife who resented me, and a father who didn’t care. Could this convoluted situation get any more complicated? Of course, it could.

The Jaguar

As mentioned earlier, I started an AA meeting at a rehab center that had recently opened. Maria, a friend in recovery, would frequently attend the meeting with me. She was a short, elderly woman who spoke and moved very slowly. Being her friend was a lesson in patience. Also, she insisted on driving in her Jaguar. Not only could she barely see over the steering wheel, she drove like a maniac. Our trips to the meeting were a lesson in gratitude. Every time I got out of her car, I was grateful to be alive.

Brett Douglas

One evening, Maria came by the shop to pick me up and was accompanied by a familiar blonde: Barbie. She told me she had been sober for a year and suggested we forget about the past. I agreed.

As the weeks passed, I discovered how fun Barbie was now that she was sober. We played off each other's humor, something I had never experienced with Paula. I looked forward to our Thursday night trips together, an enjoyable oasis in a desert of stress and misery. Soon, we were spending time together outside of the meetings. As my fourth sobriety anniversary drew near, we professed our love for each other. I felt so detached from Paula and genuinely happy with Barbie, my transfer of affection was inevitable.

When an AA member reaches an anniversary, they're invited to tell their story to the group as a means of celebrating their achievement. I decided to divorce Paula, regardless of the financial consequences, and tell her of my decision on the evening of my sobriety anniversary.

The Hospital Room

I started having chest pains which continually got worse, so I checked myself into a hospital, the same one Paula worked at. I was subjected to a series of tests to gauge the health of my heart. Afterward, as I rested in the hospital room, Barbie called. "Hey, baby. How ya` feeling?"

"About the same. I'm waiting on the test results."

"Are you going to be able to tell your story tomorrow?"

"Hopefully. I don't want to stay here overnight."

"Well, I got you a funny card. You're going to love it. Can I come by later?"

"Sure. I'll be here."

What happened next was like a scene straight out of a soap opera. Paula walked into my room. I was surprised. She had demonstrated little interest in my condition.

"Have you seen the doctor?" she asked.

"Not yet. I thought you were working."

"I am, but someone's watching my patients. I want to talk to you."

"Okay."

Paula sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to stop using drugs." Her eyes got misty.

"Okay, and what brought this on?" I skeptically asked.

"I miss you. I miss your love. I've been such a fool. Please forgive me. You're the most important thing in my life, and I've been treating you like

shit. You're here trying to do the right thing, and I'm fighting you every step of the way. Can we start over?" Her declaration seemed genuine.

"I was going to tell you tomorrow night I want a divorce," I quietly stated.

Paula clutched my hand. "Please don't leave me. We can fix this. I promise, I'm ready to stop. I know you've heard that before, but I'm serious. I don't want our marriage to end, and our kids be the product of a broken home." I continued to look down. Paula studied my expression. "Unless there's some other reason you want to leave me."

At that very moment, Barbie walked through the door. She looked at Paula and said, "Oops, sorry. Wrong room." She quickly turned and exited.

Paula looked at me. "I've seen that woman before."

I looked up at her. "She's the reason I want a divorce."

The seriousness of the situation suddenly dawned on Paula. She jumped to her feet, her hands shaking, her face distorted with grief. She begged me not to go through with the divorce, promising me she would change. My candor was supposed to relieve the stress I had been feeling the last few days. But now I felt worse.

The test results indicated my heart was perfectly healthy.

The Fellow Inmate

I had told my story three times in the past. Being a glutton for attention, I always enjoyed talking about myself. And I always received positive feedback. But my fourth-anniversary story was different. Friends told me afterward my speech was unsettling, that an angry tone bled between each word.

Paula did exactly what she had promised; she stopped using drugs and started attending meetings. I could tell she was sober. The woman I knew all those years ago had returned, a person I thought I would never see again. I should have been elated. But for some perverse reason, I wasn't. My ultimate response was inexplicable.

A man I met in jail came by the shop one afternoon. He remembered me discussing my plans to start a computer business upon my release and was amazed at what I had accomplished. I knew he had had multiple surgeries on his back due to an oil rig accident and took pain medicine regularly. After some small talk, I said, "Give me a Lortab."

"Brett, after what you just told me, I don't know if that's a good idea."

"I only want one."

"What about your sobriety?"

"I know what I'm doing. Just give me one."

So, he did. That one Lortab was the beginning of the worst five years of my life.

The Dark Corridor

The Line Begins to Blur

by

Nine Inch Nails

There are things that I said I would never do
There are fears that I can not believe have come true
For my soul is too sick and too little and too late
And my self I have grown too weary to hate

The more I stay in here
The more it's not so clear
The more I stay in here
The more I disappear
As far as I have gone
I knew what side I'm on
But now I'm not so sure
The line begins to blur

Is there somebody on top of me
I don't know I don't know
Isn't anybody stopping me
I don't know I don't know
How long can I hold my breath
I don't know I don't know
Just how far down can I go
I don't know I don't know

As I lie here and stare
The fabric starts to tear
It's far beyond repair
And I don't even care
As far as I have gone
I knew what side I'm on
But now I'm not so sure
The line begins to blur

Brett Douglas

The following is a list of actions I have never taken and events I have never experienced.

- I have never failed to pay my bills
- I have never used public assistance
- I have never been unemployed for an extended period of time
- I have never lost a home due to foreclosure
- I have never stolen from my wife
- I have never stolen from my mom
- I have never stolen from my son
- I have never stolen from my daughter
- I have never stolen from my customers
- I have never lost a business
- I have never falsely accused someone of a crime
- I have never been physically assaulted
- I have never totaled a car
- I have never had my home burglarized
- I have never perpetrated a hit and run
- I have never committed statutory rape
- I have never attempted suicide
- I have never watched someone die
- I have never had someone try to murder me
- I have never committed cold-blooded murder

All these things I have never done or experienced.

Yet.

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The longest of journeys begins with a single step. Much in the same way, the worst of debacles begins with a single drug. For a person in recovery, after that line has been crossed, all other boundaries are easily traversed. Each subsequent line becomes increasingly blurred until they're invisible. As I've stated earlier, a seemingly insignificant decision can sometimes turn out to be a life-changing event. Never has that statement been more accurate than the moment I swallowed that Lortab. I can hardly calculate what that one pill cost me.

For an addict, the most insidious part of drug use is whatever the user wants, whether it be energy, elevated mood, or relief from stress or boredom, the drug delivers in the best way. That single Lortab did exactly what I wanted. The guilt and shame I'd been struggling with were immediately washed away. I could focus more clearly on work and enjoyed doing it. *I'll only take one Lortab a day.*

Of course, my plan didn't work out the way I wanted. Within a couple of months, I was taking ten pills a day. I gradually started spending more time acquiring the drug and less on work. I cut back on expenses at the shop to cover the growing cost of my habit. Despite this self-inflicted burden, I managed to hold it together.

Much to my surprise, Paula kept a conciliatory attitude concerning my infidelity. I realized ending my marriage was a mistake. We reconciled, and I agreed never to speak to Barbie again, a promise I did not keep.

One evening, I came home to find Paula holding a cell phone bill in her hand. "Whose phone number is this?" she demanded, looking rather upset.

"I don't know," I lied.

"Yeah, well, who the fuck have you been texting at one in the morning?"

"Probably someone in AA."

"Well, I'll just call the number and find out." Paula started dialing the number on her phone.

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“Wait,” I gasped. Paula looked at me, knowing what I was about to say.

“That’s Barbie’s number,” I whispered.

“You motherfucker!” Paula yelled as she punched me twice in the face with a closed fist. I shoved her away from me, causing her to trip and hit her back on the arm of the couch before she fell to the floor. She howled in pain.

I panicked and ran to her side. “I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

Paula responded by punching me in the head again. I knew I had to get out of the house. I ran into the bedroom to grab some clothes and a carry bag. She followed me and delivered two more punches, which I deflected. I pushed her to the floor again.

“Stay the fuck away from me, bitch!” I yelled.

Paula jumped up and lunged at me again. I responded by throwing my car keys at her, hitting her in the hand. She recoiled in pain.

“I’m calling the police! You’re going to jail, asshole!” Paula bellowed as she ran into the living room. As I turned the corner after her, she was dialing a number on her cell phone. I snatched it from her hand and threw it against the wall, reducing it to pieces.

I ran back into the bedroom, desperately gathering my belongings. Paula didn’t follow me. A minute later, I heard the crashing sound of something being destroyed. As I dashed back into the living room, I saw the front door open, and Paula standing on the sidewalk leading to the front porch, holding the desktop computer I had recently built over her head. Before I could reach her,

she demolished it against the concrete. As I tried to scoop up the pieces of my computer, Paula stormed inside and slammed the door shut.

Realizing I had no car keys, I ran to the front door, expecting it to be unlocked. Paula, however, had deadbolted the door. I hit it at a full run, smashing the door out of its frame and sending wood splinters flying across the living room. I quickly ran into the bedroom and grabbed my car keys, leaving my other belongings. She intercepted me in the living room with a carving knife in her hand and chased me out the front door. I frantically jumped in my car and sped away.

As I drove to the shop, I called an employee and asked if he could open the store the next morning. I fully expected to be arrested later that evening. But the police never showed up.

As stated earlier, every personality is the sum of all past experiences and relationships. Had the roles been reversed, I would have walked away, since I grew up in a home where my parents never fought. At least not in front of me. But Paula frequently spoke of her tumultuous childhood, growing up in a home where domestic violence was a regular occurrence, usually caused by her father's infidelity. Her response was not surprising.

Although I never saw Barbie again, Paula never forgot my betrayal. It was a cloud that darkened my marriage until the end.

Eventually, my physical tolerance of Lortabs made the habit too expensive. I started shooting Roxy's again. I also discovered a new drug, Dilaudid, which is much more potent than most other pills. I typically would shoot 90mg of Roxycodone at once. But injecting 8mg of Dilaudid was much

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more intense. The rush felt like being kicked in the stomach. Before I injected the pill, I found something to hold on to so I wouldn't collapse. My 'One Lortab a Day' plan definitely didn't work out.

As had occurred in the past, Paula abandoned sobriety and started shooting dope with me. Although the progression was slow, we started spending more money on pills and less on essentials such as utilities, food, and the mortgage.

I met a drug dealer named Money, although I doubt his parents gave him that name. He sold crack from a hotel room and was surrounded by an ever-changing assortment of women who all had drug habits. I regularly had sex with them while smoking crack. Thus, I spent a lot of time in his room. He was a calm, quiet man who had no problem selling me dope on credit.

The happiness of sobriety was gone. Drugs had blotted out any recollection of my previous life, replacing it with a synthetic joy which only occurred when I was high. Life had become a never-ending struggle to stay as stoned as possible, a futile effort to avoid seeing myself. I had fleeting moments of clarity, which I stamped out like a cigarette butt. My life started to unravel quickly, although at the time, it seemed like an eternity.

For the first time since I opened Hard Drive Computers, I didn't have money to pay the rent. This failure was not due to lack of business. I had reached a point where I just didn't care about anything except the next high. Paula and I stopped paying the mortgage. I initiated several restructuring plans but was only putting off the inevitable. We started paying the minimum on our utilities just to keep them on, sometimes going an evening without power or

Brett Douglas

water. Our weekly expenditure for drugs was around \$2,000. We went from living to surviving.

We can mark the first one off the list.

~~I have never failed to pay my bills~~

Although moments of clarity became less frequent over time, when they did occur, they crushed me with great ferocity. The most intense moment happened in the middle of night. I suddenly opened my eyes out of a dead sleep, and the disintegration of my life came into vivid focus. I started crying. This wailing was a deep, guttural sadness, causing me to bawl in the most despondent manner possible. The grief hit me in waves, the next being more ferocious than the last. I fell out of bed, curling up in a fetal position in the corner, howling in agony. Paula woke and tried to console me, acting as if she didn't know the cause. But she knew. I cried for an hour until I fell asleep from exhaustion. I woke up the next morning, still curled up in the corner. Whenever this emotional eruption would unexpectedly occur, I tried my best to medicate it away.

To free up more money for drugs, Paula and I applied for and received a food card. Public assistance may not be cause for disrepute by some members of today's society, but for me personally, I felt great shame. But that didn't stop me.

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Let's mark the second one off the list.

~~I have never used public assistance~~

For the first time since I opened the computer store, Paula started spending time at the shop. As benevolent as that may sound, our time working together was not productive. We waited for a customer to spend money, then purchased dope with it. I had somehow managed to keep the store open for a year and a half without paying the rent. Inevitably, the day came when I could no longer keep the plates spinning. I was forced to close Hard Drive Computers.

As I drove home that day, I felt physically ill, as if a family member had just died. Overcome with grief, I pulled the car to the side of the road and had another crying fit. I repeatedly punched the steering wheel while screaming through my tears, "Why did this happen?"

I knew the answer to that question. I just didn't have the courage to face the truth. Once I arrived home, I announced the closing of the business to my family. No one even looked at me. I mistook their reaction for apathy, when in fact, they were surprised the business lasted as long as it did.

One more down.

~~I have never lost a business~~

When I left the store for the last time, I took all the pending repairs with me. Several of the computers I personally delivered to the customer's homes. The rest I sold for drugs.

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Six months later, I received a phone call. "This is Stan. I'm a detective with the Santa Rosa County Sherriff's Department. Our office has received numerous complaints about your store."

"Complaints?"

"Yes, I've had several people contact our office about you stealing their computers."

"All of my customers sign a service sheet that clearly states any machines left in the store over sixty days will be forfeited."

"Well, these people say every time they came by your store it was closed."

The customer's complaints were accurate. I didn't bother going to work unless I needed money. To make matters worse, I made a rather feeble attempt to return some of the work.

"I have the paperwork the customers signed. Would you like to see it?"

"Well, sir, a warrant for your arrest has been issued. If you come in this county, you'll be arrested."

I hung up. Just another fear to add to my expanding list. In fact, fear permeated my every move. I stopped answering the phone. When someone knocked on the front door, I hid in the closet. But the police never showed up. I forgot about the warrant.

Let's cross that one off.

~~I have never stolen from my customers~~

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Once I closed Hard Drive Computers, I remained unemployed for the next three years.

And another one is marked off.

~~I have never been unemployed for an extended period of time~~

I had no job and a horrendous drug addiction. To make matters worse, Rick Scott became the Governor of Florida. The preceding statement is not a political one. The reason pharmaceuticals, such as Roxicodone and Dilaudid, were so easy to acquire was because of what was known as the “pill mills.” Central Florida had a number of doctors who would prescribe copious amounts of pain medication to anyone who walked into their office with an MRI, which was nothing more than a typed letter anyone could fill out. Drug dealers would drive addicts to Central Florida by the van load and pay for each doctor visit. In return, the dealer would receive most of the pills, giving the addicts a small portion. When Rick Scott became Governor, he closed most of the “pill mills.” That effort seems like the correct course of action. But, as we all know, nature abhors a vacuum. The absence of pharmaceutical pain medicine was filled by heroin.

The problem with heroin is potency. Whenever I injected Dilaudid, I knew what to expect because the strength was always the same. In contrast, the only way to determine the potency of heroin was by injecting some and waiting for the effect, a potentially lethal test.

Brett Douglas

Throughout my three-decade history of drug use, I had never encountered heroin in Pensacola. Almost overnight, everyone was selling it. Within a month, three people I knew died. But that didn't stop me. Death was a reasonable risk.

Heroin and crack became part of my daily routine. I visited Money's hotel room three to four times a day. On one of these visits, I was approached by a young girl who was frailly thin. "Today's my eighteenth birthday. I'll fuck you for some crack."

The women in Money's room were not usually this forward, but I took her up on her offer. The declaration of her age didn't seem odd.

The next day, I went back to Money's room for more dope. A young lady named Alexa said, "Did you see that real skinny girl here last night?"

"Yes."

"That's my sister."

"Oh really?" I choked, not sure where she was going with this.

"I wouldn't touch her if I were you. She's fourteen."

Money started laughing, indicating he already knew. Once Alexa left the room, I blasted him for not warning me. He just looked at me with an evil grin. My actions the previous night bothered me if for no other reason than the legal ramification I was exposed to. The smile on his face was my first glimpse at the type of person I was dealing with. At least, the first one I paid attention to.

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There goes another one.

~~I have never committed statutory rape~~

Drugs were now my single, dominating thought. Nothing else mattered. I knew in my heart the routine Paula and I were locked in would end badly. All I could do was put off the inevitable catastrophe as long as possible and stay emotionally numb until the end. I was willing to do anything to achieve this.

Since I had already sold all my valuable possessions, I started stealing jewelry from Paula's case. My rationalization was she never wore these pieces, and I gave them to her anyway. The jewelry was quite valuable. Every dime I got from the sale was used to purchase crack and heroin. As long as no one discovered the theft, I could live with myself.

The list grows shorter.

~~I have never stolen from my wife~~

Eventually, Paula noticed the missing jewelry. Naturally, she accused me of stealing it. And just as naturally, I denied the theft, suggesting the crime was committed by Cade, one of Devin's closest friends. I knew Cade had recently gotten into some legal trouble, lending credibility to the false suggestion. When Devin learned of the theft, he physically attacked Cade and refused to speak to him any longer. I watched my son seethe over his mother's

loss, knowing I had ruined his longest and dearest friendship. Although Paula verbally accepted my explanation, she had her doubts.

Let's mark off another one.

~~I have never falsely accused someone of a crime~~

One day, Paula called me. "I just found out you stole my jewelry!" she yelled.

"No I—"

"Stop lying, you piece of shit! Meet me at home right now!"

I had filed this betrayal away and ignored it. But I couldn't hide any longer. I could live with what I had done as long as no one else knew. Even my guilt was selfish. I had another crying fit. Afterward, I knew what I had to do. But before I did it, my family deserved to know the truth.

I purchased a bottle of sleeping pills and a pack of razor blades at Walgreens, and a large amount of crack at Money's. Then I drove home, listening to the Nine Inch Nails' album *Hesitation Marks*. How appropriately named.

When Paula barged through the front door, Devin and Jordan were already sitting with me in the living room. "I wanted to tell you this myself," I said, paused, then continued. "I stole your mother's jewelry and blamed it on Cade."

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Rage distorted Devin's face. "What the fuck did you just say?!" he screamed. "You let me beat Cade's ass, and you knew the truth the whole time! You fucking piece of garbage!"

I stared at the ground while Devin and Paula bellowed their anger at me. But the most painful statement was from Jordan. "Dad, what's happened to you? I used to be so proud of you. I used to look up to you. I don't even know you anymore. You disgust me."

When Devin and Jordan left, I went to grab my car keys. "Oh, hell no! You're not leaving!" Paula yelled, as she grabbed the keys and started searching my pockets. She found some of my crack, but not all of it. I always kept my drugs separated in different pockets. She also found the sleeping pills and razors. "Here, go kill yourself, motherfucker," she said as she threw them on the floor and walked into the bedroom.

I swallowed the bottle of pills, exited the house, and started walking down the street. I assumed Paula would jump in the car and come looking for me when she noticed I was gone. So, I hid in the bushes next to the entrance to our neighborhood. As I smoked crack and waited for her car to race by, I slit my left wrist with the razor blade. The cut was painless at first. But as blood rushed from the open wound, it began to hurt considerably.

Paula never left the house. I realized she didn't care what happened to me. So, I hid in the bushes and smoked crack until the wound started to clot. With nothing better to do, I left our neighborhood and walked down the street. The sleeping pills started to take effect; waves of blackness fell over me. The

crack was probably the only reason I made it as far down the street as I did. After walking for about a mile, I blacked out.

When I came to, I was standing on a porch I didn't recognize. An old man was screaming at me to get the hell off his property. As I staggered around, a police cruiser pulled up. The officer searched me. Luckily, I must have smoked all the crack and dropped the pipe. He handcuffed me and put me in the back of his car. To my amazement, Devin was sitting in the front seat.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I just wanted to check on you," he replied, looking back at me.

"I thought you were mad at me," I mumbled as tears dripped from my eyes.

"No, Dad. I just want you to be honest with me."

"Okay."

"You lost your business because of drugs, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did." My sobs increased.

"You sold your customer's computers for drugs, didn't you?" Devin asked, looking squarely at me.

I cleared my eyes. "How did you know?"

"Just be honest with me."

"Yes, I did," I responded, looking at the floorboard.

"You haven't made the mortgage payment in a long time, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"I'll always love you. I just want to respect you again."

"I know, I know," I stammered. "I'm sorry about Cade."

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"Dad. Look at me."

I looked up at him.

"It's going to get much worse before it gets better."

The car door opened, and I was led into a building. I thought it was jail, but it was the Adult Stabilization Unit. In other words, the nut ward.

As nurses raced around me on the hospital bed, I asked one of them, "My son is outside. Can he come in?"

"Just relax. Wait until we finish," a male nurse responded.

I fell asleep. When I woke up, a bandage covered my wrist. The same male nurse was standing by my bed. "My son came in with me. Is he still here?"

"Sir, you came in here alone," the nurse replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I helped the officer bring you in, and you were the only person in the car."

I thought the nurse was mistaken. I clearly remembered the heart-wrenching conversation I had with Devin. I asked to use a phone.

"Devin."

"What the hell do you want?"

"We had a conversation last night. Do you remember?"

"Of course. I'm at Cade's trying to make up for what you've done."

"No. I mean in the police car."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Where were you after you left the house last night?"

"I spent the night at Cade's."

“And you weren’t in a police car with me last night?”

“No, Dad. I’ve been here all night. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Never mind.”

The police report stated I was talking to myself during the drive to the Twinkie ward. To this day, I vividly remember talking to Devin that night, although I know the entire exchange was a hallucination. Although the conversation never took place, I should have listened to him. Even Devin’s apparition was wiser than I.

My suicide attempt was not a cry for help or attention. It was a direct result of my venture down the Dark Corridor. Abhorrent behavior comes with a price. I despised the person I was. Whether through drugs or death, I was determined to erase my self-hatred.

Are you sensing a pattern here?

~~I have never attempted suicide~~

Life had become a sad routine consisting of two iterations. The first was lying around suffering through drug withdrawal, waiting for an opportunity to bilk someone out of cash. The second was lying around while I was high. I began bullshitting Mom about needing money, telling her Devin and Jordan were hungry or a bill needed to be paid. I only bathed when I went to meet her, an attempt to hide my desperate situation.

Paula had just made the last payment on her Lincoln Navigator when I used it on a drug run. On the way home, I stopped at a convenience store and

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shot up in the restroom. As I drove home, I could barely keep my eyes open. Less than a mile from our house, I crashed into the car ahead of me. The entire front end of my vehicle was demolished. The headlights and front bumper were lying in the street. The hood was folded up so high, I couldn't see past it from the driver's seat. Steam shot from the radiator, which was detached from the frame and hanging by the hose, touching the pavement. The car was destroyed.

Here we go.

~~I have never totaled a car~~

The sudden crash snapped me out of my drug-induced stupor. I jumped from the Navigator to examine the damage. Then, I noticed the car I hit was in worse condition, and the driver wasn't moving. Panicked, I got back in my car and attempted to drive away. The radiator dragging the ground caused sparks to fly up from the engine well. Although I couldn't see past the folded hood, I pulled a quick U-turn and sped away. As smoke billowed from the engine, I parked the Navigator behind a convenience store, ran into the men's room, hid in a stall, and waited for the police to walk in and arrest me. The authorities never showed up.

Yet another one off the list.

~~I have never committed a hit and run~~

Sitting in the bathroom stall, I shot up again and passed out. Several hours went by before I woke up and was stable enough to leave the restroom. I walked home and told Paula I put the Navigator in the shop for repairs. I believed I could keep lying to her about the missing vehicle, but after three weeks, I had no choice but to admit what had happened. By that time, the Navigator had been towed. Since we had let the insurance lapse, we never claimed it. Paula purchased a Honda Accord, which I destroyed in a similar manner.

With no vehicle, I started borrowing Devin's car to make drug runs. Once, I found \$400 under the lid of the center console. Although I knew it belonged to him, I spent it on drugs. Later that evening, Devin discovered the money was missing and broke down. "Oh my God! I needed that money! Why does my life suck so bad!" he wailed, tears streaking his face.

I watched my son's pain, completely devoid of feelings. The carcass of a human I had become felt nothing, but my self-loathing was only masked by drugs.

That was a tough one.

~~I have never stolen from my son~~

I walked inside and sat on the couch. Minutes later, Devin stormed through the front door. "You took my money, didn't you?" he screamed, his face reddened and glistened with tears.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I mumbled.

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“Stop lying to me, you crackhead piece of shit!”

I walked into the kitchen where he was standing and looked at his face, twisted with pain. My emotions started to bleed out. “I’m sorry,” I said, staring at the ground.

“GOD, I’M SO SICK OF THIS SHIT!” Devin screamed as he grabbed the toaster oven off the counter and threw it against the wall.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” I sobbed.

Devin punched me twice in the head. I fell to my knees, my ears ringing from the strikes. I started bawling. “I’m sorry, son. I’m sorry.”

“I FUCKING HATE YOU!” Devin screamed as he walked out the front door. My children moved out of the house soon after that incident and got an apartment together.

Nothing is more selfish and destructive than an addict in the midst of their disease. People no longer appear human and are instead seen as opportunities. I didn’t think twice about stealing from my son. But after mentally replaying his reaction for several days, my despondency got the best of me. I Googled suicide methods, trying to find one that didn’t hurt. Most of them are painful. But according to the website I studied, carbon monoxide poisoning is painless and should take no more than thirty minutes. I cut a section out of the garden hose in our front yard, parked my car behind a vacant building, placed the hose in the tailpipe, and ran the other end through the trunk and into the backseat. I cranked the car and waited to die. After thirty minutes, as the car started to fill with the odor of exhaust, I fell unconscious.

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Two hours and fifteen minutes later, I woke up. The car was filled with the burnt smell of exhaust. Yet, I was alive. I grabbed the end of the hose and started sucking on it. All I got was a headache. After another forty-five minutes, I removed the hose and scored some heroin instead.

I was always looking for new drug dealers. If I perceived them as having the propensity for violence, I paid for their product and moved on to the next one. But when I found one I judged as weak, I would ask for a large amount of dope on credit and then not pay them. Basically, I was daring them to do something about it. And I was usually a good judge of character.

Money had a rather cavalier attitude when it came to my drug debt. He also had the hots for Paula. I decided to stop paying him. I ran up a massive bill and started buying from other dealers. After a couple of months, I forgot about Money and the debt I owed. That is until I pulled into the driveway of another dealer, and Money was standing in the front yard. I didn't see him. He grabbed me by my shirt and shoved me against the car. "You best have some fucking money for me!"

"You know I'm going to pay you."

"What you got on you?" He started to reach in my pocket. I had money to buy crack and wasn't willing to give it to him. I knocked his hand away.

"I don't have any money," I protested.

"Then why the fuck are you here?" With that question, Money reared back and punched me in the side of the head. I dropped to the ground and almost

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blacked out. He rummaged through my pockets and took my money. “You best start paying me, motherfucker!”

That one hurt.

~~I have never been physically assaulted~~

Afterward, every time I had money, I had a choice to make: pay my debt or purchase drugs. I always chose the latter. One evening, Paula and I were awakened by banging on the front door. Like a coward, I hid in the bathroom, while Paula answered it. Money shoved her to the ground and walked into the bedroom, yelling, “Where’s that piece of shit husband of yours?”

I walked out of the bathroom and stood nose to nose with him. “If you don’t have my money by this weekend, I’m shooting this place up,” he hissed through his teeth.

The next few nights were sleepless, waiting for the retribution I knew was coming. A week later, I came home and found our house had been broken into, and every remaining possession I owned had been stolen. I never heard from him again. Eventually, Money was sent to prison for shooting a man.

They’re dropping like flies.

~~I have never had my home burglarized~~

My relationship with Paula had become a codependent nightmare. I deservedly became her scapegoat. Getting high was the only relief from her

Brett Douglas

hostility. Our marriage was no longer based on love. We coexisted simply to feed each other's need for drugs. When Paula was high, she amorously expressed her love for me. But when it was over, all I heard was sheer hatred. Maintaining our high was the only way I knew to keep her happy, and I would do anything to prolong the peace.

We had been paying into a college fund for Jordan since she was two years old. While dope sick, I cashed in the fund, receiving \$11,000. Paula was unaware of this theft. I spent every dime on crack and heroin. The fund took fifteen years to save, and one week to blow. I stuck my beloved daughter's future education into my veins.

And there goes another one.

~~I have never stolen from my daughter~~

I bought a half gram of heroin from Jennifer, a drug dealer I frequently used. Although all dealers brag about the potency of their product, most of the time they're exaggerating to compel you to buy. But Jennifer never warned me unless it was warranted. "Brett, listen to me. This shit is strong. Please be careful, okay?"

"Sure thing." Once at home, I conveyed Jennifer's warning to Paula.

"They always say that bullshit," she said as she walked to the bathroom.

"If Jennifer said it, you better be careful." I yelled as the door closed.

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Fifteen minutes later, Paula stumbled into the living room and collapsed. I'd seen her do this before, so at first, I thought nothing of it. But, as the minutes passed, I noticed her chest wasn't moving. I walked over to her and saw something I had never seen before. Paula's face was purple, and her lips were dark blue. Panic struck me. I knelt next to her and tried to shake her into consciousness. Paula was dead weight. The hue in her face and lips were slowly transitioning to a darker shade. As loud as I could, I screamed in her ear, "PAULA! WAKE THE FUCK UP, PAULA!" Absolutely no reaction. I shook her vigorously. "OH, MY GOD! PAULA! PLEASE WAKE UP! PAULA! PLEASE!"

I threw cold water in her darkening face. Still no reaction. My hands started to tremble. I fell to the floor and carefully examined her chest. No movement. I felt her nostrils. No breath. I grabbed her wrist trying to get a pulse, but my hands were shaking so badly, I couldn't find one. I placed my ear against her chest. No heartbeat. The inescapable truth hit me like an anvil in freefall. Paula was dead.

One more crossed off.

~~I have never watched someone die~~

I grabbed my cell phone to call 911 but stopped after looking at our house. Needles, spoons and crack pipes were lying on every table and countertop. I dropped the phone and knelt at Paula's side again, forcing myself to calm down so I could think clearly. I remembered her practicing CPR on me

years earlier. So, I placed my mouth over hers and blew. Air exited her nostrils, hitting me on the cheek. I pinched her nose and blew into her mouth again. I sensed a faint movement in her chest, so I blew several more times. I then placed my ear against her chest, discerning a faint heartbeat. I blew into her mouth several more times, each session causing her pulse to increase in strength. But Paula was still completely unresponsive. Every time her pulse started to taper off, I would breathe into her mouth again, not knowing if I was doing the right thing. I knew the phone call I didn't make might be responsible for my wife's death.

After forty exhausting minutes, Paula finally bowed up and drew a deep, loud breath on her own. I watched her chest heave sporadically for the next fifteen minutes. When at last she opened her eyes, the crippling emotions I had suppressed for the last hour spewed forth. I balled up on the floor and loudly sobbed. Paula placed her hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong, baby?"

"You just died, I had to breathe for you, I just watched you die..." I sobbed inaudibly.

"No baby, it was just a bad dream," she gently whispered, trying to console me.

"It wasn't a dream," I mumbled.

"It's okay. You just had a nightmare."

I sat up, grabbed her by the shoulders, and screamed, "IT WASN'T A FUCKING DREAM! I JUST WATCHED YOU DIE! I'VE BEEN BREATHING FOR YOU FOR THE LAST HOUR!"

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Horror twisted Paula's face. We both held each other and cried. I told her I was a coward for not calling an ambulance. She responded by saying I had done the brave thing. Paula was wrong. Afterward, we both shot more heroin.

Mom and I have always had a special relationship. She was the only person who stood by my side throughout the darkest moments of my life, holding on to the elusive idea my life had worth. I did everything I could to prove her wrong.

She had to have noticed all was not well with her son. Maybe she just didn't want to see it. Perhaps the pain of acknowledging the failure my life had become was simply too much to face. Maybe she saw some redeeming quality in me that no one, including myself, could see. Whatever the reason, she continued to give me money for the myriad of false reasons I gave her, fueling my addiction even further. I knew how much love she had for me and wielded it like a weapon against her.

Mom made the mistake of giving me her credit card number to order some takeout food. Over the next month, I took \$14,000 in cash advances with it, every penny spent on crack and heroin. When she received the credit card bill and confronted me on the charges, I blamed the fraud on Paula, although she had nothing to do with it. What happened next added credence to my false accusation.

There goes another one.

~~I have never stolen from my mom~~

Brett Douglas

Flush with money, Paula and I spiraled out of control. After a four-day binge with no sleep, we decided to wind down by drinking liquor. As she spoke to a friend in the other room, I heard her make a disparaging remark about me. Thoroughly drunk, I confronted her while she was still on the phone. "What the fuck did you just say? Look who's talking. You're the worst wife ever, you fucking whore."

If I dished it out, I had better be able to take it. And no one dished it out like Paula. "Fuck you, you piece of shit! Look at you! You lost your business, you stole from me, your mom and Devin, you fucking worthless drug addict! You don't fuck me because you can't get a hard-on. You're a fat, bald, ugly, disgusting waste of a human being! I wish you would have killed yourself when you had the chance! I can get any man I want! Why did I waste my life with a piece of garbage like you? No woman would ever want you, you're so disgusting!"

In my heart, I knew she was right. I drunkenly stumbled into the kitchen and grabbed a knife. I walked into the bathroom, locked the door, and held my left wrist over the toilet. I made three hesitation marks, then closed my eyes, pressed the knife against my wrist as hard as I could, and quickly yanked it across. The blade sliced my arm open to the bone. All the fingers in my left hand stopped moving, and blood poured into the toilet along with my tears.

I had never seen that much of my blood at once. I knew this time I wasn't going to walk away. I leaned back against the bathroom wall as a large puddle formed on the floor. Paula started banging on the door, "What the fuck are you doing in there?"

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She jimmied the lock and barged through the door, witnessing what I had done to myself. "Oh no, that's not how you kill yourself. Give me that knife, and I'll help you," Paula gleefully screamed as she stood over me.

"Fuck you. Just leave me alone."

"Hurry up and die, motherfucker!"

I staggered into the living room and laid on the couch, holding the cut against my shirt. Paula followed me. Standing at the end of the sofa, five feet from me, she bellowed, "I fucking hate you! I hope you bleed to death!" She picked up my cell phone and hit me in the head with it, shattering the screen. I instinctively kicked her in the chest, causing her to fall backward. She remained motionless for a few seconds, then stood up, her face red with fury. She grabbed the knife out of the bathroom. I jumped up from the couch.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" Paula screamed. She swung the knife at me twice, which I avoided by jumping back. The next swing came at my face, which I deflected by holding up my right arm. The blade left a three-inch gash. She then stuck the tip of the blade against my stomach. "I'm going to gut you like a pig!" she snarled between her teeth.

I believed her. Killing myself was an idea I had no problem with. But having this crazy bitch do it was unacceptable. I ducked around a table, ran outside, and drove off.

Another one eliminated.

~~I have never had someone try to kill me~~

As I drove down the street, blood flowing from my wound, I debated if I should drive to my children's house and add more insanity to their lives. I was having difficulty staying awake as I drove, thus felt I had no choice. The thought of driving to a hospital never occurred to me.

Around 4 am, I arrived at Devin and Jordan's apartment. My daughter gasped when she opened the door. I collapsed on their kitchen floor, my shirt drenched in blood. She called 911, and within minutes, I was being wheeled into the back of an ambulance. I lied to the paramedics about the cause of both wounds, blaming the entire incident on Paula. I was too embarrassed to admit the truth.

As I rested in the hospital room waiting for the doctor to sew up my arm and hopefully restore movement to my fingers, a sheriff's deputy walked in to take my statement. I told him the same lie; Paula caused the wounds on both arms. "We were arguing," I explained, "and I don't want to press charges against her."

"That's out of your hands now. Your wife's been arrested already," the deputy stated.

"What? When?"

"Right after the 911 call was made. She's been charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon."

The seriousness of her charge didn't dawn on me until several days later. Paula was facing prison time, a punishment I knew she didn't deserve. Despite my hatred for her, I couldn't bear the idea of her going to prison for something she didn't do. I moved in with my parents, and she moved in with

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hers. Both families agreed divorce was the correct course of action. I filed a restraining order against her to help facilitate the separation. During this craziness, our house was taken in foreclosure. Paula and I were now homeless.

The list is almost gone.

~~I have never lost a home due to foreclosure~~

Over the course of the next two weeks, I mentally wrestled with the gravity of Paula's charges. Her plight plagued my every thought. I knew I had to keep her from going to prison. The restraining order prevented us from speaking directly, so I promised her mother I would fix this problem somehow.

One evening as I rested in my parents' spare bedroom, my cell phone rang, displaying a blocked number. "Hello?"

No response.

"Hello?"

"Hi," Paula whispered.

"Hey."

"You're not going to have me arrested for calling you, are you?"

"No, of course not."

She started crying. "Please don't let me go to prison."

"Baby, calm down. I'm going to fix this. You have my word."

"My mom says there's nothing you can do."

"Well, she's wrong," I said, knowing she was probably right.

"I miss you. Can I see you tomorrow?"

“Sure,” I answered. Despite everything that had happened, I still had trouble saying ‘no’ to her.

Paula informed me she had secured a lucrative nursing job in Houston. She suggested we start a sober life in a new town. The idea sounded irresistible. Pensacola had become a museum of horrors; every street contained a sad or painful memory. I believed a relocation would solve my drug problem. Of course, we *were* moving closer to the Mexican border. The next day I filed a statement with the State’s Attorney assuming all responsibility for the injuries I had sustained. All charges against Paula were dropped.

Before we left, we had a drug blowout. Paula and I smoked crack and had sex for an entire month. We purchased a gram of heroin and shot up on the drive to Houston, agreeing to stop using and go back to AA once we arrived. During the trip, I nodded off at the wheel and caused two separate accidents within an hour, destroying our car.

I managed to rent a vehicle, and we pulled into Houston hours before her first shift started. Immediately after dropping her off at work, I found an AA meeting. The recovery community in Houston was incredible, with literally hundreds of meetings throughout the day. I quickly made new friends and attended two meetings every day.

Paula, on the other hand, wasn’t interested in sobriety. Despite the promise we made, she continued to drink and insisted on going out to nightclubs on the weekends. I managed to stay sober for a little over a month before I succumbed to the urge. Within two weeks, we were both shooting heroin and smoking crack again. Devin, Jordan, and Mom stopped speaking to us. Paula

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and I fought constantly and stopped paying our bills. Eventually, an eviction notice was posted on our apartment door. Despite all the change, nothing had changed.

To make matters worse, Paula's venom increased in intensity. Every day, she threatened to throw me out on the street, leaving me homeless in a large city I barely knew. In hindsight, her tossing me away would have been best for both of us. Fear prevented me from seeing the truth. Every evening, I listened to her review the lengthy list of failures my life consisted of while she sucked on a crack pipe. My hatred for Paula had grown to the point where I started thinking about hurting her. Staying high was the only way I could squelch such thoughts. But eventually, I could no longer suppress my fury.

Within weeks, Paula lost her job. We were about to be homeless and penniless in a huge city. The noose I had placed around my neck had become so tight, I decided to jump and get it over with. Paula's last paycheck would be direct deposited into her account on Friday. My plan was to wait until the money was available, murder Paula, spend the money on crack and whores, and, when the money was gone, take my own life. What a plan!

I cut a section out of an extension cord and fashioned a garrote. Early Friday morning, once I knew the money was in her account, I placed it under our mattress. Paula sat at the end of the bed with her back to me smoking crack and hurling insults at me. I decided to approach her from behind, yank the cord around her neck, and at the same time, thrust my knee into her back, pushing her forward. She would fall face down with my entire weight on top of her. Within minutes, she would be dead. Every stinging word she spoke reaffirmed

my decision. I pulled the garrote out from under the mattress and carried out my plan.

The last one is now gone.

~~I have never committed~~ cold blooded murder

Wait!

Before we cross that last one off; something completely unexpected happened. As I stood behind Paula, garrote in hand, my mind went to a place I hadn't visited in a long time. The image of Memaw and Pawpaw popped into my head. What would they have thought of the man I had become? I stared at the lethal weapon in my hands, thinking of the irreversible action I was about to take. The thin thread of humanity my grandparents had woven into my dead heart stopped me from crossing that final line. I stuck the garrote back under the mattress. Letting Paula live was a more fitting punishment.

My new plan was to take my own life by means of a drug overdose. Later that evening while Paula slept, I drew up the largest shot of cocaine I could manage to fit in a single syringe and injected it into my vein. I thought the large dose would cause my heart to fail. Instead, it produced an episode of cocaine psychosis, a condition brought on by the ingestion of an excessive amount of cocaine and results in the human brain detaching from reality. As soon as I pushed the plunger down, I fell to my knees, and the walls around me disappeared.

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When I looked up, I was standing in a chapel with a large picture of myself sitting on an easel at the end of the center aisle. Mom, Devin, and Jordan were hugging each other in front of me. Through their tears, they kept repeating, "What a shame. What a shame." I was witnessing my own funeral. Looking back, I realize this vision was a warning. At the time, however, I took it as a directive.

I had another debilitating crying fit which lasted an hour. When the grief had subsided, I knew exactly what I had to do. I left the apartment, purchased some alcohol, and rented room 320 at the Texan Inn for a week. I smoked the last of my cocaine, drank the alcohol, and made a bed of pillows and blankets in the bathtub. I took a bar of soap and wrote on the mirror, "My lifelong torment is over. Don't be sad. I'm at peace."

I laid in the tub and pulled a knife from my pocket. I placed my arm, palm up, on the edge of the tub. My plan was to stab my arm deep enough to start an arterial bleed. With the knife in my right hand, I thrust it down as hard as I could into my upturned arm. I felt the tip of the blade hit the bone as blood gushed from the wound. The only problem with my plan was it hurt like a motherfucker. Three of the fingers on my left hand stopped moving, the same ones doctors had repaired almost a year earlier. Initially, I panicked over the loss of movement. *I'm never leaving this room. What does it matter?*

The puncture wound bled profusely for fifteen minutes, then started to clot. I realized my plan was flawed. I stood up from the tub, blood dripping on the floor, and walked over to the mirror. I looked at the ghost of the man I used to be between the letters of my suicide note. Undeterred, I placed the blade up

to my neck and sliced it open. By the time I laid back in the tub, my shirt was drenched. Every time I leaned my head back, blood spurted into the air, synchronized with my heartbeat. I finally succeeded where I had failed so many times in the past. I had the car and Paula's debit card, so I knew she couldn't find me. I had barricaded the door so no one could get in the room. I felt relief.

As wave after wave of warm blood flowed down my back, I knew I was experiencing the sensation of death. I had often heard before someone dies, their entire life flashes before their eyes. But that's not entirely true. Since I was fortunate enough to have some time for reflection before I died, I mentally rehearsed the events which led me to this moment. I thought of the people I was leaving behind, the opportunities I had squandered, the trust I had destroyed, and an entire life wasted for drugs. I couldn't conjure up a single reason to stop what was happening. Although the air conditioner was off, I started to feel cold, and my breathing became labored. As I fell asleep, my last conscious thought was, *It sucks to die alone in this shitty motel room.*

I closed my eyes for the last time.

The Aftermath

Clean

by
Depeche Mode

Clean

The cleanest I've been
An end to the tears
And the in-between years
And the troubles I've seen
Now that I'm clean
You know what I mean
I've broken my fall
Put an end to it all
I've changed my routine
Now I'm clean

I don't understand
What destiny's planned
I'm starting to grasp
What is in my own hands
I don't claim to know
Where my holiness goes
I just know that I like
What is starting to show
Sometimes

Clean

The cleanest I've been
An end to the tears
And the in-between years
And the troubles I've seen
Now that I'm clean
You know what I mean
I've broken my fall
Put an end to it all
I've changed my routine
Now I'm clean

As years go by
All the feelings inside
Twist and they turn
As they ride with the tide
I don't advise
And I don't criticize

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I just know what I like
With my own eyes
Sometimes

Clean
The cleanest I've been
An end to the tears
And the in-between years
And the troubles I've seen
Now that I'm clean
You know what I mean
I've broken my fall
Put an end to it all
I've changed my routine
Now I'm clean
Sometimes

My eyes opened. An unfamiliar ceiling rushed past. Someone was repeatedly pressing on my chest. A plastic mask was covering my nose and mouth. I knocked it away and attempted to sit up, but someone else pushed me back down. "Don't move. Just relax," the person commanded.

My slight movement caused the world to spin uncontrollably as if I had rolled out of an airplane and was plummeting to the ground. I followed the suggestion of whoever was talking.

I heard a car door open. With all my might, I lifted my thousand-pound head. I was being placed into an ambulance.

A paramedic asked for my name and an explanation as to what had happened, but I barely had the energy to talk. A different paramedic attempted to start an IV but noticed the horrendous track marks which littered my arm. Instead, he started one on the back of my hand, the only veins I had not destroyed.

By the time the ambulance reached the hospital, I had absorbed enough life to speak. "Why didn't you let me die?"

"Because nothing's worth dying over," the paramedic responded.

"That's what you think."

My gurney was wheeled into the emergency room as nurses and doctors rushed around me. By this time, I felt better, a fact I was not happy about.

"You're wasting your time. As soon as I get out of here, I'm finishing what I started," I snarled at the doctor.

"So, you're still feeling suicidal?"

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“No, I’m referring to the crossword puzzle I didn’t finish. WHAT THE FUCK YOU THINK I’M TALKING ABOUT?”

A Hispanic police officer had been standing near the foot of my bed the entire time I was lying there. After the medical staff left my bedside, he handcuffed my wrist to the armrest.

“What the fuck is this?!” I yelled.

“There’s a warrant for your arrest in Florida,” the cop answered.

“YEAH WELL, FUCK YOU, PIG! I HOPE YOU DIE IN THE LINE OF DUTY!”

He just smiled, enraging me even more. “WHY DIDN’T YOU MOTHERFUCKERS JUST LET ME DIE!” I started violently yanking my cuffed arm, trying to break free.

“If you continue doing that, I’ll cuff your other arm,” the police officer stated.

“FUCK YOU, YOU PIECE OF SHIT!”

The thought of going back to jail solidified my desire for death. I looked around for a sharp object, but nothing useful was within my grasp. I then noticed the IV taped to the back of my hand. When no one was looking, I chewed through the plastic hose, causing blood to stream from the severed line. I hid the hemorrhage under my sheet, hoping I would bleed to death before anyone noticed. When it started to lessen, I pushed the needle deeper into my hand and sucked on the hose. After about thirty minutes, a nurse saw the puddle of blood on the floor and repaired the IV.

Brett Douglas

After the hospital visit, I was taken to the psychiatric ward of the Houston jail and placed in a rubber room, wearing the clothing equivalent of a manila envelope. I'm not sure why it's called a "rubber room." It's made of concrete, including the bed I was supposed to sleep on.

Later, I was taken out of my cell to talk to the doctor. "So, can you tell me what happened?"

"I'm a drug addict, and I don't want to live with it anymore."

"You know you can get help for this problem?"

"I know all that bullshit. Look, you're wasting your fucking time with me. The first chance I get, I'm taking my life. You have no idea what it's like," I snarled.

I was placed back in the so-called "rubber room." Some time later, a tray of food was shoved through the slot in the door. The only utensil was a flimsy, plastic spork. I chewed on the end of it, attempting to create a sharp edge, and tried to reopen the wound on my neck, but it wasn't rigid enough. Having gone five days without sleep, exhaustion overwhelmed me. I passed out on the concrete bed.

I have no idea how long I slept. The lack of windows made gauging time impossible. I was roused several times to eat, which I did and quickly went back to sleep. At some point, I opened my eyes and looked around my cell. As I mentally reviewed the events of the last few days, few months, few years, I shuddered. *What... the fuck... AM I DOING?*

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Sanity had returned. I stared at the sterile cinder block wall next to my bed. Placing my hand on it, I thought, *I put this wall here*. I laid motionless, fixated on my arm against the wall, a metaphor for my entire life.

From decades of attending AA meetings, my next course of action was clear. When the inmate trustee came around with the tray of food, I asked, "Can I have a pencil and some paper?"

"No way, man. You're on suicide watch." I guess giving suicidal people pointed sticks was against protocol.

"I won't hurt myself. Please. I've got something I must write."

After some cajoling, I convinced him to slip the things I requested through the slot. "If you get caught with that shit, you didn't get them from me," the trustee insisted.

"I'll say I stole them. Thank you."

I started writing my life story. I wanted to understand who I was and why I behaved the way I did, an AA fourth step of sorts. Each day, the trustee brought more paper, begging me not to divulge where I got it. Although my promise to him was a minuscule one, it was one I planned to keep. A modicum of character had blossomed in me.

I was extradited back to Pensacola. The process was a slow and tedious one. The trip from Houston to Pensacola usually takes eight hours. But I was shackled in the back of a prison van for seventy-two hours straight, the entire time sitting next to some guy who had shit in his pants. For the theft of the computers, I was sentenced to a year in jail and placed in a work release program. I could leave the jail to go to work then return afterward. Having a

larceny charge made finding a job difficult. But, eventually, I got a job washing dishes at Cowgirls, a restaurant in Orange Beach. (Thank you, Shirley!) The job was quite therapeutic, a chance for reflection while being productive at the same time. Plus, being around life again was exciting. The work release program also allowed me to reestablish contact with my friends in recovery, who were happy to find I wasn't dead. I got a new sponsor, Chris (not my high school friend), who walked me through the twelve steps. My new-found freedom also gave me a chance to buy drugs, an opportunity I did *not* take advantage of. I sensed something had changed in me.

The book you have just read is the memoir I wrote during my incarceration. I must admit, this effort has been painfully enlightening. At some points, I would laugh hysterically, recalling fun times and loving friends. At others, I would weep, reliving the despair of my addiction and the pain I inflicted on others. For the first time in my life, I harbored regret over my past actions, the first baby step in the painful process of growing up. I guess that's why they're called *growing pains*. And, as a result of writing this book and working the twelve steps with a sponsor, I have indeed learned a lot about myself, my addiction, and my recovery.

I've already mentioned the first five steps of the AA program. The next two read as follows:

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

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Basically, I need to be aware of the flaws in my character and be willing to correct them. I could write a new book just on my defects. Instead, I will attempt to hit the high points, or low points, depending on how you look at it.

While writing this book, I discovered the degree of my selfishness, whether it was with time, money, love, drugs or honey buns. I never wanted to share any of these things. But more important, I never wanted to share myself. In other words, I refused to let anyone know who I really was. I constructed a wall around myself and vigorously fought to keep everyone on the other side. Occasionally, I would let someone over, but those people were always on the periphery. For the people who loved me, I purposely made the wall too high to surmount.

This issue is indicative of a lack of congruency. In other words, my inside never matched my outside. I believed every endeavor and relationship in life required a grand performance, and I had to appear to be the person you needed me to be. Lack of congruency causes a constant state of conflict and peace is not possible while this happening. The person I am on the inside must match the image I project to the world.

My resistance to change is another deficiency. The fickleness of life seemed like a curse, the inevitable crash which always followed those moments when circumstances were exactly to my liking. I now realize the only constant in life is change, and this unpredictability is actually a blessing. Without change, I would be stuck in the fatal cycle of addiction with no hope of altering my direction. The uncertainty of the future is truly the juice of life.

Brett Douglas

Honesty has always been a challenge for me. I would lie for no other reason than the sake of lying. Or I would lie to please others. Dishonesty is so hardwired into my character, the first words to leave my mouth in any conversation are usually untrue to some degree.

Honesty comes in several flavors. The first is cash register honesty, which is not stealing. All calculated, I have stolen three-quarters of a million dollars from various people. And what did I gain from all that money? Nothing but a black mass of nightmarish memories.

The second flavor is honesty with others. At one time, I believed most situations required some degree of dishonesty. For example, when Paula asked if her pants made her butt look big, my answer was always “No,” regardless of how she looked. Alton, one of the counselors at the work release center, pointed out, “Why would you lie if her pants make her look bad?” I realized dishonesty was not required near as often as I thought. If I truly love someone, I need to tell them what they *need* to hear, instead of what they *want* to hear.

The third type of honesty is the most important, honesty with myself. I’m a drug addict. I must be clear on that fact. I must never forget it, or I will be doomed to repeat the same mistakes. Addiction is a disease for which I will never be cured. I will deal with affliction until the day I die. Being a drug addict sounds bad, and ultimately, it is bad. But my most glaring flaw can become my greatest attribute. Some people don’t appreciate the blessings in their lives because nothing has ever changed. They never get the chance to experience the blessing of loss, the gift of despair, and the richness of forced introspection. I can’t truly appreciate the value of something until it’s gone and had no frame of

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reference when it came to my own life. Now, having experienced such loss, I have a new outlook.

I've lived a life steeped in resentment, fear, shame, anger, and guilt. I feel shame and guilt about the past, fear of the future, and resentment and anger over my current circumstances, all of which are unnecessary expenditures of energy. The chance of me having a better past is ZERO. I must let it go. No need to fear the future, for it hasn't arrived. All I have is today. And what I do today will affect my tomorrow. I will find no peace until I accept everyone and everything in my life exactly as it is at this moment. And anything I can't accept, I must remove. Stress, anger, and frustration are detrimental to anyone's existence. But for an addict, these mental states are lethal. For this reason, I knew my marriage had to end. Six months into my sentence, I filed for divorce. Paula moved out of town right after our split. I also realized I will never be able to have a relationship with Robert. He still refuses to talk to me, but at least now, the feeling is mutual. Robert and Paula are two people I cannot accept. Let me clear on this point. They are not the cause of my addiction, nor do I blame them. I have damaged those relationships so badly, the three of us will be better off never speaking again. They are now part of my past

I believed drugs were my problem. If only I could stop getting high, all my troubles would go away. As it turned out, drugs weren't my problem. Brett was my problem. Drugs were the solution to my Brett problem. And since that solution failed miserably, I needed to find a different one, a way to deal with life without self-destructing. I wasted most of my days before recognizing

this fact. Drugs were merely a symptom of my inability to find peace. And no matter how fast I ran, I could never outrun myself.

The next two steps go like this:

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

I must make amends to those people I have harmed. My list of victims is vast. I may never meet the man whose bank account I emptied, the Jewish gentleman I insulted in New Orleans, the people who ate the ice cream I pissed in, the police officer who ate a fly on his hamburger, the owners of the hotel I burned to the ground, or the countless people I've harmed who were not mentioned in this story. But I must be *willing* to make amends to those people if the opportunity arises.

Sometimes, making amends is simply apologizing, but it usually requires more. For Mom, Robert, Devin, Jordan, and Paula, staying sober is perhaps the best amends I can make. But the money I stole from them must be paid back. These reimbursements are not to help the people I victimized. These payments are for me. By doing this, I can close that book and know in my soul I am no longer the man I used to be. I must find peace with my past. As soon as I received a paycheck, I started making payments to my daughter. It's a drop in the ocean, but it's a start.

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I must love myself before I can love anyone else. Although that statement is rather cliché, it's true. For most of my life, I acted on impulse, doing, saying and stealing anything I wanted, regardless of who I harmed. I would even hurt others simply for my amusement. But I paid a hefty price for my behavior; I loathed the person I was. And for me, self-loathing and drugs go hand-in-hand..

Part of loving myself is knowing who and what I really am. Am I a decent person who only acts deplorably when using drugs, or am I an evil person who only feigns decency when it's expedient? For most of my life, I didn't know the answer to that question. I now know I am both of those people. Much like the two sides of a coin, I have two very distinct personalities. Unlike a coin, however, my good side takes effort, or it will disappear.

The next step says,

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

I can sum this step up in four words. Don't be a dick. The depth of my dickness is astounding. If I want to stay sober, I can't behave the way I once did. And I'm not referring to just drug use. My addiction touched every aspect of my life. It influenced every decision, altered every priority, and dictated my every movement. Thus, recovery must also touch every aspect of my life. Drugs were not a hobby, an occasional occurrence, or a weekend activity. Drugs

were a lifestyle. I can't replace that lifestyle with something I do when it's convenient or beneficial. I must replace that lifestyle with a different lifestyle.

I will inevitably affect certain people in a negative way, even when I'm trying my best. Perfection is unattainable. But I must try to be *aware* of how my actions affect others and *willing* to fix any problems if possible. Awareness and willingness are the best I can hope for.

Drew Carey once said, "I think I'm trimming down. It must be that sit-up I did." If I want to be physically fit, I must do more than one sit-up. I must work on it every day. Recovery works the same way; it's a daily effort. Sobriety is not simply abstinence; it's reacting to real-life situations in an adult-like manner. Every person I encounter is an opportunity to work on myself. I must set the bar so high, I will forever be struggling for it. If I ever allow myself to be satisfied or complacent, the only place to go is down.

Continuing...

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Numerous times, I've heard people say, "How am I supposed to know what God's will *is*?" That question is a difficult one, and I don't know how to answer it. I must admit, I don't know what God's will *is*. But I definitely know what God's will is *not*. God's will is *not* for me to steal from, lie to, cheat on,

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or hurt the people who love me or anyone else for that matter. God's will is *not* for me to shame my children. God's will is *not* for me to be selfish or isolated. God's will is *not* for me to hold resentments or grudges. When I act badly, I want compassion. But when others act badly, I want revenge. God's will is *not* for me to smoke crack with whores or stick needles in my arm. I'm pretty confident about that one. And above all, God's will is *not* for me to die a miserable, lonely, and painful addict death, which is probably the reason I'm still alive. I guess God's will *is* the opposite of all that shit.

And finally,

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and practice these principles in all our affairs.

I am, indeed, the sum of all the experiences and relationships throughout my life. I can trace every belief, behavior, thought and characteristic I possess back to something or someone in my past. But I'm not defined by those things. I'm defined by the impact I have on the lives of other people. I want Memaw and Pawpaw's funeral, not Bea's.

I can also choose how my past will affect me. No matter how awful the event or behavior, I can always learn from it if I allow myself. Even better, I can use my experience to help another person who is struggling with the same problem. My past is a devastating train wreck, a succession of deceptions,

failures, and suffering I can never change. The *only* way I can give my life a purpose is to extend my hand to another human being who is going through the same pain and say,

“There is another way. And if I can get sober, *anybody* can.”

So, what does all of this have to do with staying sober? How does honesty, selflessness, and acceptance help me stay clean? How can resolving my resentments, shame, guilt, fear, and regrets keep me from using drugs again? How will making amends for my digressions keep me from getting high? The process seems to have no correlation to addiction. But it does. Everything suggested by Alcoholics Anonymous points to a single goal:

Peace.

Long-term sobriety is impossible without it. For my entire life, a battle has raged inside me, even before I started using drugs. I was at war with the world and everything in it. No one thought or behaved the way I believed they should, causing me anguish and misery. I felt detached from everyone and hated them for it. I lived in a constant state of turmoil. Drugs were the only peace I knew. They were the only thing that made me happy, calmed my nerves, and made life worth living. If my only source of peace is unavailable, I had better find it somewhere else. The suicide note I wrote on the mirror held the answer, although I didn't realize it at the time. “My lifelong torment is over. Don't be

sad. I'm at peace." I was willing to die for it. As it turned out, my torment did end that day. Just not the way I had planned.

So, how is peace achieved? The war must end. And since the conflict is all in my head, that goal is attainable. By repairing the damage I've caused to the best of my ability, I can be at peace with the past. By allowing everyone to live their lives the way *they* see fit and working solely on myself, I can be at peace with the world. By not only acknowledging the fact I'm an addict but embracing it, I can be at peace with who I am. And above all, by distancing myself from those things I cannot accept, I can sustain my peace. I had to make some difficult decisions and end some long-term relationships, but to do otherwise is death. It's that simple for an addict like me.

As I write these words, my incarceration is over. I will be released from this jail within the next hour. When I walk out of this building, the life I had before will be gone. The wife, the father, the children, the beautiful home with a white picket fence, the cars, the business, the dog and three cats, my clothes, and all my other possessions are now part of my past. Yet, for some reason, I feel wealthier than I have ever felt before. I still have no idea how the paramedics found me in that motel room in Houston. I have been given the most valuable of gifts, one I will not squander. Nor will I compromise on what I know to be right.

Wadell, a counselor at the Friary, would frequently say, "Stand for something, or fall for everything." I spent my entire life falling for everything. I wasted so much time trying to be what I thought others wanted. I capitulated, even when I knew my decision was wrong. Now, I must be in control of my

life, no matter what the cost. The thought of leaving the financial security of the family business was unthinkable. I believed any amount of turmoil, stress, and unhappiness was worth the monetary reward. The idea of ending my marriage and being alone was equally unimaginable. Now, I realize no amount of money, sex, prestige, or security is worth my peace.

As hopeless as my situation appeared, Mom never gave up on me. Her unconditional love, a result of her upbringing, was the only constant throughout my life. I must project the same unconditional love to my children. I will never give up on Devin and Jordan. I owe them that much.

I have learned from painful experience that the disease of addiction is progressive. But recovery is also progressive. When I finally turned the corner, everything I had learned from twenty years of attending AA meetings was still with me. My concept of God was still with me as well. No amount of time pursuing recovery was wasted time, even when I was high.

The most important revelation was actually a betrayal. I loved drugs. I felt dope was my best friend. But I couldn't see the true nature of my sweetest companion. Looking back, I now see my best friend betrayed me. He robbed me of everything I valued, everyone I loved, and all things joyful and happy. My best friend destroyed my hope, erased my dreams, ruined my ability to love and, most significantly, took my soul. And while my best friend was doing this, he smiled and convinced me he was on my side. My best friend turned out to be my worst enemy. I am, however, truly blessed. Most addicts die holding hands with my best friend. For some bizarre reason, I was one of the lucky ones who lived long enough to peek behind the veil my best friend hides behind. I

American Drug Addict

now see my beautiful friend is actually the broadest extent that ugly can possibly be.

I'm not sure what I'm going to do next. The uncertainty of the future is exciting, as well as frightening. But I know what I'm *not* going to do. I'm not going to use any mood or mind-altering substances.

Just for today.

Who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Note to Self

by
The Divine Comedy

Monday

Restate my assumptions

Heaven and hell

Do not exist

Tuesday

Restate my assumptions

If you die you do so

At your own risk

Into the heart of darkness

Beyond the point of no return

Wednesday

Restate my assumptions

Beauty is not

The same thing as youth

Thursday

Restate my assumptions

Only one thing beautiful

That's the truth

Into the heart of darkness

Beyond the point of no return

What the fuck is happening?

Where has everybody gone?

What the hell is going on?

There is nothing as frightening as being alone

Friday

Restate my assumptions

The writer writes for himself

Not for you

Saturday

Restate my assumptions

A song is not a song

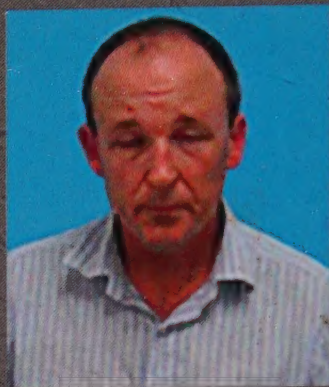
Until it's listened to



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About the Author



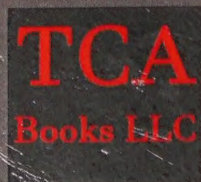
My Mugshot

Boy, that was a bad day. My name is Brett. I'm a college educated man who was once a husband of 26 years with two children, three businesses, and a large home with an actual white picket fence. I'm also a drug addict. And I have a tale to tell.

My story has everything: sex, death, pain, atheism, God, jail, marriage, divorce, heresy, homosexuality, physics, traffic fatalities, computer science, video games, cinnamon toothpicks, Barry Manilow, Nine Inch Nails, pornography, breasts, used tampons, strippers, venereal disease, abortion, prostitutes, AIDS, racism, suicide, infidelity, public nudity, anti-Semitism, marijuana, alcohol, pawn shops, drug dealers, needles, acid, ecstasy, crack, heroin, pain pills, withdrawal, interventions, rehabs, product tampering, road rage, vandalism, elderly abuse, grave desecration, arson, identity theft, burglary, armed robbery, and murder.

But more importantly, it's about the despair of addiction and the absolute certainty that it can be overcome. Recovery is not simply abstinence, but a process of growing up. I spent my entire life searching for the key to long-term sobriety.

I would like to share with you what I have learned.



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